ORIGINAL ARTICLE

On love

Notes on the construction of meaning in romantic relationships

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Abstract
In this paper, I will explore love as a universe of meaning constituted at the cross-roads of cultural patterns and actors' biographical experiences. Universes of meaning provide a structure of cognitive pre-selections. While the social in general is composed of a multitude of universes of meaning, they belong to the public. Romantic relationships are private and enable privacy. I will (1) propose a definition of love and a framework that serves to ensure its theoretical validity. I will then (2) analytically deconstruct the unity of communication, interaction, eroticism, and emotionality as love's different media of experience and explore their self-referential functionality.

Keywords Institutionalization of emotions · Sociology of knowledge · Meaning-making · Universe of meaning

Introduction to love

Sociological theory, with some exceptions, generally does not address romantic relationships[1], instead referring them back to more individualizing academic disciplines such as psychology (Felmlee and Sprecher 2006). Broadly speaking, this originates in the prerequisite that love is either an emotion, a sentiment, a passion (e.g., Ekman and Friesen 1969; Ekman 1973; Kemper 1987; Solomon 1993, 2004; Seebach 2017), a neuro-biological constant resulting in an affective state of the body (Aron

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[1] In this paper I use "romantic" or "intimate relationship" and "love" interchangeably and in the broadest sense. The terms "romantic" or "romance" hold no normative implications. They are used to distinguish romantic relationships to the love for God, children, parents, nature, the Party, or truth.

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et al. 2006, Lenz et al. 2013), or an interwoven mixture of both (Esch and Stefano 2005; 2007; Fishbane 2013). The assumption seems to be that it is better to leave the discussion of love to the respective experts of the relevant disciplines. This is not to say that the cultural and social content of love is unexplored. This would ignore recent discourse and advances in sociology, which places "emotions" in the context of its cultural foundation, social order, and biographical experience of the actor (Shilling 2002; Collins 2004; Schroer 2005; Turner 2008). However, sociological discourse is largely referring to love in its transformation and iteration as part of a (capitalistic) modernity (Blau 1964; Berger 1967; Fromm 1981/1956; Beck 1992; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997, 2019; Hochschild 2003b). While often brilliant and outstanding in their analysis, these works sometimes seem to speak more to the *process* of commodification of love in modern capitalism than the phenomenon itself.

In this paper, I do not attempt to add yet another aspect to this discourse. Rather, I pose the hypothesis that love is not an emotion in the first place. It rather is an effect of actors distinguishing themselves from the public sphere and committing to certain institutionalized engagements in an interactional, communicational, sexual, and affective perspective. Tying these media of experience together is a "private universe of meaning." Universes of meaning are culturally founded, interconnected systems of predetermined interpretations of the world (Berger and Luckmann 1991, p. 104). Experiences become tangible by being contextualized within the "cognitive logic" (Schütz 1962) of a universe of meaning, self-referentiality contributing to its maintenance.

Love as a private universe of meaning

In this initial chapter, I will elaborate on love as a private universe of meaning relying on Peter Berger's concept of the social construction of the individual actor's reality. I will concentrate on four pivotal aspects: The *structure* of the actor's reality and the *process* of constituting and maintaining a universe of meaning, as well as the peculiarity of *privacy* and the question of *participation* in its plausibility structure. These four aspects are interconnected, but for the sake of analytical clarity, I will try to highlight their idiosyncratic features and identify connections.

The structure of reality and its maintenance

Cultural products, both immaterial and material, and meaning-bearing social objectifications as well as institutionalizations constitute an undeniable external facticity (Berger 1967, p. 15). It is only through confrontation with this external reality that the human organism transcends its biological nature and becomes a true actor, both interdependent and independent (Luckmann 1967). Thus, structure simultaneously limits and enables freedom (Giddens 1992). Against this backdrop, the process of producing and maintaining man's objective facticity, as well as its relation to the internal reality of the actor, can be conceptualized more clearly. From the perspective of the individual actor, internalization occurs when, in the course of

socialization, the objectivations of external reality are absorbed into the actor's consciousness and become a subjective and meaningful reality. From the perspective of structure, the actor externalizes individual experiences using preexisting objectifications, maintaining and, in some circumstances, gradually transforming the stocks of cultural and social products of society (Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1991, pp. 149–193). This dialectical approach mitigates the distinction between external and internal reality: one cannot exist without the other. If there is an inner reality of an actor, there must also be a corresponding accumulation of objectified and socially valid knowledge—and vice versa.

This model is very dynamic and adequate to explain both traditional and modern societies in their various iterations. It also accounts for the fact that the social structure of modernity is quite complex and differentiated. For the actor, this amounts to more freedom, but also the challenge of constantly dealing with an "order of existence" (Gurwitsch 2010) that is fragmented into a multitude of "universes of meaning" (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Universes of meaning exist twofold. Firstly, they are an aspect or a section of the actor's order of reality (Schütz 1962, p. 207). They provide a connecting and unifying "style of existence," in which raw sensory data is coherently bestowed with meaning (Gurwitsch 2010, p. 390). They are immersive in the sense that their relation to the world is experienced in a unique and definable way, as they endow the actor's experience a particular "accent of reality" or "cognitive style" (Schütz 1962, p. 341). They imply, suggest, and often demand a specific interpretation of the world that is not up to the actor but is supra-individual and grounded in historically, socially, and culturally validated knowledge (Berger and Kellner 1981). Secondly, they are distinct communicational, interactional, emotional, and esthetic forms of the objective world (Luhmann 2012), deeply embedded in the social and cultural foundations of society. The relation between subjective constitution and objective construction is far from arbitrary, free floating, or negotiable: courses of action and, thus, experience always derive from culture (Swidler 1998, p. 185). Henceforth, I use the term "universe of meaning" to refer to both interwoven aspects, the *constitution* of the actor's experience, and its *construction* by external objective facticities. It is peculiar for love as a universe of meaning that what has been public becomes private, once it is enacted by the new lovers. While actors constantly use socially validated set pieces, they make them their own in the process of being in love.

This conceptualization of love warrants further explanation. "Love" is a universe of meaning in the same way the "American family," the "state," or "capitalist economy" are (Berger and Kellner 1981, p. 31). As such, love is highly symbolic, more a guiding principle or narrative than a concrete course of action. Understood in this way, there can be little doubt that in Western modernity one of the highest symbolic values is attached to love, romance, and intimate relationships. One could argue that the legitimization of love even justifies violations of other universes of meaning, such as law or religion. It is significant that revenge against a perpetrator of violence against a loved one, be it the partner or a family member, is associated with justified anger and might be assessed differently by the law than violence against strangers—or even mitigated altogether (Sherman and Hoffmann 2007). Similarly, in contrast to "love" as a cultural principle, "*a* love" is a set of concrete and specific social agreements, institutionalizations of

typical courses of action, objectifications of meaning, behavioral scripts, artifacts, and roles. In both cases, love constitutes an "interpretive scheme" that denotes the effects of "social/collective meaning and action-organising schemata" (Keller 2018, p. 32). One side of this universe of meaning refers more to an actual and pragmatic framing of experiences and, thus, to choosing specific courses action, the other side more to legitimizing these experiences in the first place.

So far I must admit to universes of meaning remaining an abstract concept. I have yet to explain how they are constituted and how they function as an intermediate between the social and its cultural foundations as well as the individual actors and their reality. Universes of meaning are formed by a multiplicity of interconnected and interlocking objectifications and institutionalizations that relate to each other on the basis of, or under the canopy of, an overarching symbolic legitimization. Both solve one of man's most profound problems: how to create time. Like all organisms we live perpetually in the here and now. Only in actual situations other actors are fully present to us. To become truly social, we must employ a mode of communication and interaction that transcends beyond the limitations of immediacy. Objectifications and institutionalizations solve this problem. Objectifications are relatively stable and robust thought objects that contain socially and culturally validated meaning and interpretation. Human products, both immaterial and tangible, from language, numbers, writing, money, tools, and architecture, to the designs of cities and landscapes would essentially be meaningless in themselves. They would not even exist if they were not to appresent meaning or to be used in a habitualized way which then again is perceived in a certain, predetermined understanding. Only if the object is endowed with meaning, if a signifier is coupled with objectivated experience, it appresents and makes the transcendent present. In other words, over time and by the externalization of subjective experience an object starts to "mean" something to others as well (Berger and Pullberg 1965; Schütz 1962). When action reciprocally defines act and actor it becomes institutionalized and regulates behavior (Berger and Luckmann 1991). These institutions can be conceptualized as "constraints" in social exchange (North 1991). Institutionalizations regulate and shape interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1991), communication (Luhmann 2012), and emotions (Hochschild 2003a).

Talking about love, *privacy* becomes essential as it is its defining feature. To be clear, "privacy" neither implies that objectifications entail no relation to the public stocks of knowledge in regard to romantic relationships nor that lovers are completely free, anarchic or unbound to enact their love. Instead, privacy denotes a greater latitude to transform objectifications and institutionalizations of love into one's own by gradually superseding common knowledge with lived experience. Meaning becomes exclusive to those who produce and maintain it. I will now elaborate on privacy as a concept of love and the process by which it is constituted.

Privacy, agency, and plausibility structure

Universes of meaning are generally historical and public. Actors are born into a society and become participants by internalizing its objective reality, essentially making it their own. This is how knowledge, order, and structure are upheld. Of course, in

order for actors to enter this process of world maintenance, reliable objectifications and universes of meaning must already exist. Accordingly, while participation itself is essential, the actual effects in terms of transforming the appresented meaning of an objectivation are negligible. Generally, in the public sphere meaning is upheld by a resilient "plausibility structure" (Berger 1967). Plausibility structures are not comprised of actors themselves. They are the "social base" of a universe of meaning, its cognitive logic, objectifications and institutionalizations (Berger and Luckmann 1991, pp. 174–182). This includes institutionalized courses of action, language or lingo, stocks of knowledge, products and processes, even architecture and organizations pertaining to a universe of meaning, as well as its idiosyncratic approach to the world. The plausibility structure of "the law" is based on a variety of elements, including but not limited to a formalized legal code, a corresponding public knowledge of enforced and prohibited acts, formalized language, publications, courts with special jurisdiction and hierarchy, academic training, staff, a diversified law enforcement machinery including prisons, structural couplings with the press, policymakers, representations in film and television. These element are embedded with a certain symbolic legitimization. The plausibility structure of the law is "rigid" or culturally "settled" (Swidler 1998), and thus, its corresponding universe of meaning is valid in its entirety without the need of any further legitimization but its existence in the first place (Berger 1967, p. 47). An individual actor will subscribe to the cognitive logic of a universe of meaning and its plausibility structure, but will not change its meaning in any significant way, shape or form.

The privacy of love, *a* specific and tangible love, structures the universe of meaning differently. Whatever becomes of the relationship, to a certain degree depends on the partners to agree on content, form, meaning, and process. This is not to be understood as indicating that romantic relationships are arbitrary. Lovers must adhere to the cultural repository that found and legitimizes love and provides a framework for the newly emerging universe of meaning. Which elements or set pieces lovers choose however, is for them to decide—tradition, social status, education, religion not withstanding. One could even say that courtship is the process of matching and coordinating exactly this: the careful agreement on the elements the new universe of meaning is to be constructed from. While still consisting of familiar elements, objectifications, and institutionalizations, but it will be unique to the lovers. In the private sphere, mutual objects of thought can (and must) be *developed*, not just *internalized*. It is feasible to think of this as "agency" (Walsh 1998). In the course of a relationship, the public meanings of phenomena are superseded by personal, biographical, and, above all, mutually shared experiences that constituted interconnected objectifications and institutionalizations. In this universe, things have meaning primarily intelligible to the partners.

I would argue that this distinction, which is essentially privacy, is what constitutes the "form" of a romantic relationship in the first place. It is the foundation and reason of a very unique approach to experiencing the world and essentially excludes all other cognitive options (Luhmann 2012, pp. 216–236, 1995, pp. 16–23). Privacy then is the answer to the question of the idiosyncrasy of love, understood as a conceptual process in which biographically shared experience becomes a specific cognitive approach. Still, the specific love remains part of the social order and founded in culture. Without

a socially recognized, publicly shared, and historical system of expression and content, the private could not be conveyed to another actor. If anything, culturally established objectifications serve as intermediates between actors, enabling them to share personal experiences by using public means of communication. Otherwise, there would not be any private universe of meaning in the first place. But even here privacy must be treated with caution: In accordance with the Schützian assumption that socially validated, relevant knowledge is distributed unevenly (Schütz and Luckmann 1974, pp. 324–332), love as a cultural principle and as a set of social predispositions is, while public, only in theory accessible to every member of a society. The empirical world of love (and of universes of meaning in general) is not coherent, without being disjointed. Actors deviate from predetermined guidelines, interpret scripts and roles in their own ways, and act and experience relationships on the fringes of what is barely recognizable as love from the outside. Not only is relevant knowledge not shared by all, i.e., experienced and understood within—and sometimes beyond—a particular frame of acceptance, but the uneven distributed amounts to different cognitive approaches (Swidler 2001). Since actors are (also) a product of social structure, class, ethnicity, gender, education, health status, personal biography, and their intersections, different stocks of material, social, and knowledge resources associated with these social domains must lead to different interpretations of reality.

Based on this theoretical framework, I will now discuss the forms of experience that actors have in their romantic relationship. It goes without saying that what follows must be an abridgment of the lived experience of the individual actor. As a conceptualization of the self-referential nature and functionality of love, it nevertheless remains valid.

The experience of love

Love is experienced as a totality. I propose that love is constituted by being experienced in different media. These are as interrelated as they distinct regarding their properties. Actors do not break down how they are addressed by their beloved or how a relationship is enacted in a specific moment—a feat that is unlikely to be accomplished in real time. There have already been attempts to deconstruct the totality of love into its essential constituents. Haller (2016) suggests that love is composed of four distinct components, namely a cognitive, ethical, interactional, and emotional category. Sternberg (1986) also identifies three distinct components, with "intimacy" evoking an emotional experience, "passion" calling to the afflicted body and sexual consummation, and "commitment" referring to a cognitive experience and volition. Finally, Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999) discuss "passion" and "intimacy" as indicative of love. These examples may suffice to show that there is no broad consensus about what love actually consists of. Much more decisive for me, however, is the question of the nature of the individual components, beyond their descriptive specifications. What functions do these constituents entail, in themselves and in relation to other aspects of love? It seems obvious that the sense data constituting, for example, a communication and a sexual experience apprepent very

different meanings, which in turn are idiosyncratic for the quality of the sense data in which the objectification is experienced.

There are some distinct consequences to this question. I have already argued that objectifications appresenting meaning are an externalization of the lived experience of actors. But the experience is not specific only to its appresented "content" or the universe of meaning it pertains to. The experience is also dependent on the type of sense data actors perceive. When lovers become visually aware of the partner, the experience is bound to the perceived quality of sense data: the "content of this awareness of one's experience's being visual can be specified only in terms of (by reference to) the sensory phenomenology associated with visual experiences, i.e., what it's like to see colors, shapes, etc. So the phenomenological content essential to having an experience is part of an experience's intentional content, whatever else may be part of its intentional content" (Montague 2012, p. 77).

Beyond a phenomenological approach, it is feasible to ask whether different forms of experience are also idiosyncratic. With Luhmann (1986) I will call these qualities "media." As with visual sense data being exactly this—visual—and visually shaping the perception of the object, it can be assumed that different "media of experience" also appresent content idiosyncratically. Even more, it is feasible to assume that some appresentations are more likely to be conveyed in one medium rather than others. They likewise fulfill a distinct function in this medium, and this one alone. I suggest that there are four distinct "media" of experience in a romantic relationship. First, love is a flow of self-referential communicative acts or communications. Second, love is a series of institutionalized interactions that range from a broad spectrum (courtship, consolidation, normalization, and dissolution) to specific, everyday life micro-interactions. Third, love is an emotional response to a specific social relation that leads to a mutual sense of closeness with other actors. Fourth and finally, love is a contractual agreement that enables close physical contact. All four media of experiences are self-referential, i.e., they are founded in and at the same time maintain love as a universe of meaning.

There are a few points that still need to be addressed before elaborating the different media. First, neither interaction nor communication, emotionality nor sexual activity is specific to love. They become distinct experiences in their own right and pertain to a romantic relationship because they are grounded in a private universe of meaning, an order of existence that compels the actors to perceive sense data as "romantic," and at the same time constitute idiosyncratic appresentations that are discernible to the fullest only by the lovers. Second, content, purpose, and media intertwine. Actors use different media to express themselves in ways that depend on the purpose of their actions, but at the same time are intertwined with the form of the medium used and its ability to appresent meaning more effectively or appropriately than others. I already elaborated on the internalization of objective facticity, becoming the actor's subjective reality. This process not only applies to the meaning of an objectification, but also to the medium the object is experienced in. A hug or a kiss convey the feeling of closeness and the transformation from friendship to love differently than the statement "I am experiencing an emotionally affected condition of the body and the mind, let us begin a monogamous dyadic relationship"—which is why one is used more frequently than the other to indicate romantic

intentions (Brehm 2021, p. 532). The same is true vice versa. A relationship can be assessed as an intentional emotional engagement on a bodily and affective level of one actor toward the other (Solomon 1993). Love, then, is a judgment about a social relationship as is hate, despair, or disgust. As actors, we tend to believe in such emotional propositions, even if they are much more blunt and undefined than actual speech and its reflexive abilities. On the contrary, it is difficult to dissuade an actor from certain courses of action, if he or she has already engaged in emotional judgment. It is important to reiterate that the way lovers experience different media is highly dependent on the cultural and social repositories of a society.

I will now discuss the four media in which lovers relate to the universe of meaning called love. How do they make possible the totality of the experience called love?

A typology of four media of romantic experience

The four different media of experience in a romantic relationship have yet to be typified to complete my attempt to conceptualize love.

Communication

Love's communication amounts to *intimacy*. On the surface, it is the most banal statement that there is communication in romantic relationships. Lovers talk, write, and text all the time, perhaps even resort to more exotic means of communication. In this process, a "relationship" (in the sociological understanding of the term) develops (Eadie and Goret 2013). Yet, communication in romantic relationships is *intimate* as it is directed *exclusively* at one specific actor and can, at least in theory, touch on any subject. This distinguishes love from all other forms of communication.

Communication in romantic relationships should be considered from three interrelated perspectives: content, genre, and function. "Content" refers to the meaning that is appresented in the lovers' communication. Leading up to a relationship lovers seem to "talk," disclosing information that should be considered inappropriate for the public sphere in such a concentrated form. This trust-building sharing of one's history as well as a general view on life continues with the beginning of a relationship, excluding others (Giddens 1992). Then, communication often becomes sexually charged and emotionally saturated (Jonason et al. 2016), increasing the degree of privacy and separation from the public sphere. It should be noted that communication at the beginning of a relationship is interwoven with all other media of experience, reflecting on them, thus, reinforcing their effects. However, even with the almost inevitable decline in sexual activity in the later stages of a romantic relationship (Willets et al. 2008), this change in frequency may be addressed in ways that are only possible with the intimate partner.

"Genre" pertains to a lesser degree to meaning, but to "lover's talk" as a generic type of communication (Luckmann 2009). Here, thought objects are modeled as a specificly formed narrative structures that becomes an objectivation itself. This refers to the fact that conversations are socially constructed in terms of their sequential

nature, process, para-linguisticity, and purpose/function (Bergmann and Luckmann 1995; Luckmann 2009). Some very specific genres come to mind, that are easily distinguishable: debate, confession, or teaching class. As participants in everyday life we are able to easily identify these genres without the need to know their actual content. The communication between lovers is often constructed around privacy, opting for possibilities to retreat from the public eye, being attentive, or making physical contact, and embedding their personal experiences as lovers into broader themes. Again, there is a dialectical relation between culturally validated knowledge about lover's talk and the genre itself relying on a distinction from the public sphere.

Intimate communication's "function" is to increase stability. It does not aim at clarity or inclusion but at the communicative reification of the status as lovers. This eschews all normative or dogmatic implications; even more so, it does not distinguish between "good" and "bad" relationships. Dispute, conflict, and chaos, even abusive or toxic attachment are entailed in the concept of intimate communication, founded in exclusivity, and part of the cultural patterns called love.

It is the exclusivity of romantic communication in all three aspects that facilitates the lovers' relationship, as they share an intimacy that would be inappropriate in other contexts (Luhmann 1986; Giddens 1992; Sternberg 1986, 2006; Forstie 2017). Thus, I depart from any attempts to understand intimacy as a particular form of trust (Richo 2010), a willingness to share deeply emotional and "private" experiences with one's partner (papers in Harvey and Wenzel 2001; papers in Mashek and Aron 2004; Helm and Carlson 2013; Canning 2008), or vulnerability (Firestone 2018). Rather, intimacy is an effect of and the foundation of the separation from the public sphere as well as being based on it. It is the use of those communicative properties that are deemed private by the public. In other words, the particular qualities of intimate communication are mostly public knowledge, and actors are usually well-versed in the art of private communication. This only comes to pass if love as a communicative process starts, thus drawing a distinction to the public sphere (Luhmann 1986, 1992, 2012).

Interaction

As far as interaction is concerned, love first and foremost provides *security*. At first glance, this may seem like a misconception or even a contradiction given the number of separations and divorces. However, looking at the empirical phenomenon in a more theoretical perspective the meaning of the security love offers in terms of interaction becomes clearer. From an anthropological perspective man is endowed only with a relatively weak morphology. Man is not bound to a specific habitat. While able to and often obliged to make almost any stretch of land habitable, this endeavor can only be accomplished through cooperation, collaboration, and specialization. In other words, man needs to compensate for a weak morphology by establishing strong, dependable and predictable social relationships (Gehlen 1988; Plessner 2019). It is well established that humans have created *institutions* to deal with this fact and to compensate for the energy they constantly would have to expend were social relations always to be established from scratch, situationally and on the spot. But this security comes at a price—the actor sometimes becomes alienated from the man-made world that is originally intended to

provide a functioning and livable environment (Berger and Pullberg 1965; Turner 2010; TenHouten 2017). This is of course one of the most essential laments about modernity. Modernity's public sphere is highly structured, tightly institutionalized, based on the division of labor, and characterized by technological production and bureaucracy—and practically beyond the control of the individual actor. Moreover, as Weber (2012, p. 19) notes: There is a process of selection embedded in every institution. Either actors adapt to the predetermined, institutionalized ways, or they are excluded from the community of those adhering to them eventually. The cognitive logic of the public sphere is virtually impossible to change or modify by an individual actor. It simply takes effect. As institutions persist for centuries, their existence is endowed with an ontological status seemingly independent of actors' will and volition (Searle 1995, 2010).

While seemingly the antithesis of "freedom," this process rather refers to symbolically legitimizing perceiving the world in specific ways. Only if social relations lose their ontological status by virtue of a weakened plausibility structure, social order becomes "unnatural." This comes with the price of being an alienated stranger in one's own world (Berger et al. 1973; Berger and Luckmann 1991, p. 107). From Berger et al. (1973) to Giddens (1984) to Beck (1992), the finding of a loss of an overarching nomos in contemporary western modernity persists. As a result modern actors are alienated from the very world they built for their survival. Giddens (1992) very clearly assumes that "ontological security," i.e. actor's premise of being in control despite the complex structure and sometimes contradictory universes of meaning, is established through routines. While public institutionalizations at their core are supposed to do just this, their lack of controllability for some thwarts the purpose of providing certainty. I propose that romantic relationships counteract this effect—at least to some extent. For Berger and Kellner (1964), committed love constitutes one of the few social relationship in which nomos, an overarching sense of meaning for all experiences, still does take hold. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, love in particular becomes the "central pivot giving meaning" (1994, p. 170) to actors. More than that, precisely because interaction in romantic relationships can be institutionalized at least to some degree by the actors themselves. They convey a sense of empowerment to act according to their own volition. Routines that fit one another are enacted, controlled and monitored only by the lovers themselves.

The simple fact that most romantic relationships end in separation does not preclude this thought. On the contrary, since there is always the possibility of a "do-over," there is also a chance to change things. However, change requires agency and the notion of control. Partners can break up, but a new relationship can be built on the foundation of these experiences. The security of being able to shape relationships as one sees fit is clearly rooted in the privacy of love. The lover's experience translates to a notion of agency (Giddens 1984; Archer 2000). But the opposite is also true. Because the actions of private relationships are perceived as being based on the volition of the actor, their experience is separate from the public realm.

Sexual activity

Sexual activity in romantic relationships is characterized by the notion of *property*, a term coined by Collins (1992, pp. 119–132). As with all media of experience, sexual

activity amounts to a strengthening of the romantic universe of meaning. The universe of meaning contextualizing all experiences in a romantic relationship, and particularly its exclusivity, can nowhere be found more explicitly than in the property of the other's body. The aspect of property refers to an interaction that is distinct from all others and unique to romantic relationships. This is neither due to the quality of the sexual encounter nor the sex act facilitating pleasure, reciprocity, and intense solidarity (Collins 2004, pp. 228–237). Rather, romantic relationships provide institutionalized access to another actor's body that is far removed from any other form of social interaction. I define "sexual activity" broadly as all physical and erotic acts between two actors that involve transgressions and violations of personal space or "territories of the Self" (Goffman 1971, pp. 28–61). There are institutionalized transgressions between adults in public life, for example, in care, nursing, and medical procedures. But these are based on necessity. In romantic relationships, these transgressions are based on volition and the cognitive logic of love. It is after all the notion of exclusivity that characterizes sexual activity. Property, then, does not refer to the sexual actor. Rather, it defines the relationship between two partners, the way one acts toward the other and understands his or her actions in terms of sexual desire (Collins 1992, p. 122). Love implies a contractual agreement between lovers. At the end of courtship, negotiations to enter into a relationship are complete. This "contract" is grounded in a cultural repository and in most cases leads to the institutionalization of exclusivity and monogamy. The agreement to enter into monogamy (or a different form of sexual relationship), and therefore the increased probability of rather risk-free sexual intercourse between partners can be considered the basis of a committed relationship.

To clarify this basic principle, some explanations are in order. Property of the other's body simplifies sexual intercourse, even turns it casual and routine in some instances. But while access to the lover's body dispenses with complicated formal discussions, it comes at the price of limiting the number of sexual partners—at least in monogamous relationships. What could be seen as a distinct disadvantage in regard to the variety of sexual encounters and even being at the mercy of a continuous attraction to the lover, again strengthens the universe of meaning by exclusivity. Experiences, even in their unpleasantness or absence, further the distinction between the lovers and the public. Limitation (monogamous sex) and possibility (general consent) form a reciprocal distinction (Seebach 2017). This holds true even if the actual quality and quantity of sexual encounters is unsatisfying.

This principle is valid not only for sexual intercourse, but any physical activities that must be considered inappropriate in public life. Exactly how this demarcation is enforced must be negotiated between the partners. The importance attached to an embrace may vary from one couple to the next and depends on the cultural backdrop. Polyamorous and asexual relationships (Scherrer 2010a, 2010b) further complicate the apparent unambiguity of linking sex and exclusive romantic relationships. Adding to this ambivalence is the fact that the frequency of sexual intercourse and overall sexual satisfaction varies vastly regarding time and form. Generally speaking and disregarding the age of the lovers we know that cohabitating couples have sex more often than married ones. While marriage is commonly known as the only iteration in which sexual intercourse is universally approved of, its frequency

decreases the longer the marriage lasts (Liu 2000; Hill and Kopp 2004, p. 231) and if lovers become parents (Kornrich et al. 2013). Finally, there are of course sexual interactions outside of romantic relationships, e.g., casual dating, prostitution, and masturbation. Collins (1992) goes to great lengths to distinguish individual pleasure seeking from sexual activity as a ritual of interaction that furthers solidarity among participants. That being said, the agreement of access to the lover's body can be postponed by either partner for an undisclosed period of time or reason. Although the term "property" may falsely raise concerns that it is an extension of the patriarchal rights men exercise over women (Pateman 1988), this implication is not intended.

Contractual access does not preclude the situational refusal to have sex. On the contrary, actors are involved in a variety of other institutionalizations that constantly require acts of perception, sense making, and fulfillment of socially recognized requirements, whether in the domestic sphere (housework, childcare) or in paid employment that will interfere with the couples sexual activity. Elliott and Umberson (2008) report a variety of situational breaks in the access to the partner's body that do not necessarily amount to termination of the arrangement itself. Because frequency of sexual activity is correlated with marital satisfaction and marital satisfaction is correlated with the likelihood of separation and divorce, there are institutionalized ways to deal with these irregularities. These are primarily referred to as couples counseling and therapy. Communication and emotionality regarding denial of access to the body are therefore routinely integrated into romantic relationships. The expectation of possession shapes communication, interaction, and emotionality as much as the denial of sexual activity. Perhaps no issue is more central to a romantic relationship than property, regardless if it is in its fulfillment or in its denial.

Emotion

Finally, regarding the one medium most commonly associated with romantic love, its emotional aspects or *emotionality* are defined by *labor*. To break this down, it is necessary to examine Hochschild's concept of "emotional labor" (1979) in more detail. She proposes that the social world is not only structured in terms of interaction and communication but that actors also are compelled by conventions to feel in accordance with the situation they perceive. As a society, our feelings are ordered—or, institutionalized. Because we know that a particular situation requires an appropriate emotional response, we feel accordingly. Like any emotion, "love" is the appropriate bodily response and expression of a situation within the confines of a historically pre-negotiated and validated framework, and to certain communicative, interactional, and carnal engagements (Gordon 1990; Glaser and Strauss 1965; Turner 2007; Shilling 2002). The actual emotional response of actors in love is the result of the work invested in the ability to feel the right emotions in discernible situations (Hochschild 2003b, pp. 119–126). In other words, reality is structured not only in terms of experience, interaction, and communication but also in terms of emotions. The emotional landscape is highly ordered, and in everyday life we perceive this as normality. There is sadness and grief in death, enchantment in (some) religious experiences, joy in

birth and success, and passion and devotion in love. Actors adhere to objectively valid regulative principles or "emotional rules" (Hochschild 1979). The social construction of the body and its emotional aspects are crucial (Schroer 2005; Turner 2008), yet Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 203) essentially opted out and chose not to discuss them in any meaningful way, shape or form in favor of language. Feeling rules fill this gap. Emotional reality is as socially institutionalized as interactional and communicative reality. Not only do habitualized actions typify the actor—and vice versa –, feelings also typify the afflicted self—and again vice versa.

In this understanding, lovers become lovers because they are emotionally affected by an institution called love, which in turn takes place only because a certain typical emotion occurs. It could therefore be argued that love, grief, or desire are not emotions at all. Rather, they are affective institutionalizations that place the actors involved in a particular relationship with each other. It is important to mention that this does not preclude the notion of authenticity any more than actors talking within socially tried and tested communicational defaults. "I love you" is not an novel sentiment, and still it often genuinely expresses an emotional response.

There are essential consequences to this. First, I would like to point out once again the processual nature of love. The proper emotional state is not endogenous; it is an effect of the individual actor's socialization and must be constantly maintained by "being felt" in regard to structure (Eisenberg et al. 1998a, b; Eisenberg et al. 1998a, b; Zahn-Waxler 2010; Denham et al. 2015; contributions in Lewis and Saarni 1985). By adopting a particular world perspective, ideally all of the individual's experiences become meaningful within the confines of society's socially validated knowledge. While at a general level the structure of external facticity and inner reality align and correspond (Berger 1966, p. 106; Berger and Luckmann 1991, p. 137), "emotional labor" is constantly required to bring the actor in tune with situational requirements (Hochschild 1979; 2003a). The "depth," intensity, or "authenticity" of an actor's passion in and commitment to a love relationship cannot be considered on its own. It depends on the partner's actions, the willingness to be "involved," the circumstances of the relationship, and the general culture in which the relationship takes place (Markus and Kitayama 1991). For example, in some regions and cultural contexts, homosexual love is still somewhat frowned upon and socially shunned. Therefore, homosexual lovers might not allow themselves to become as emotionally involved as they would if their relationship was perceived in a more positive and favorable manner. That being said, an actor will adapt his or her own emotions to the structure and situation, i.e., how other actors respond to expressions of emotionality. We dress up nicely for dinner together and "get in the mood." And we find it natural to work on our partner's emotionality as well. We are attentive to our partner, maybe give presents or create a special mood during a romantic evening by arranging for appropriate music to be played. The continuity and exclusivity of an emotional bond with the partner cannot be overestimated. As with sexual activity, the feeling of being in love, even more so the feeling of being loved, is unique to the actors in a romantic relationship. It is an experience that cannot be replicated or replaced by anyone else. It is founded in a universe of meaning and essential for its upholding. Therefore, emotional labor is a quintessential part of any romantic relationship.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to conceptualize love as an effect of experiences that are based on the constitution and maintenance of a private universe of meaning. Here, all perception is structured in such a way that of all the possible meanings the object could reasonably appresent "love" predominates. Love emerges from four different media of experience: Self-referential communication, idiosyncratic interaction, sexual access to the partner's body, and an emotional response to these experiences. All this derives from set pieces from the cultural repository pertaining to love. In this sense, love is and must be public. But the more the lovers share, i.e. externalize mutual experience and objectivate these into objectifications that are appresenting elements of *their* love, the more the universe of meaning becomes private and stable. Then, over time and through a multiplicity of four different media of experience, the universe of meaning evolves and expands into a totality. Understood this way, love is not an emotion in the first place, but an affective response to the decision to constitute and participate in a private universe of meaning. It is an emotional proposition about a social relationship with another actor. As such, it affirms attachment to the partner and excludes all other ways of experiencing the world. A love exists outside the public sphere. It is personal and up close. As a love is exclusive it is not accessible to anyone except the actual participants of the respective universe of meaning. Those affected by and at the same time maintaining the universe of meaning are identical to its custodians of the knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like to discuss the implications of this concept. The ability of actors to distinguish and differentiate themselves from their (public) environment is the defining feature of love. Partners draw a line in the sand between themselves and everything else. They become exclusive. By this, love overcomes modernity's tightly institutionalized forms, its division of labor, its adherence to technical production and bureaucracy, and its anonymity (Berger et al. 1973). The public sphere is as impersonal as it is dispassionate—at least in an ideal world in which public institutions simply fall into place, ensuring everyday life to proceed without major disruption (Sennett 2002). Love is not. Love is an iteration of the hope to be "somebody" in modernity, to be authentic, to be experienced as an individual in the truest sense by one's partner, and to have agency. Exactly the exclusivity of love is also its greatest weakness. Opportunity and risk go hand in hand: while the extremely limited plausibility structure provided by only two actors allows objectifications to emerge and supersede social appresentations, this also carries a tangible danger: a falling out between the partner cannot be mitigated. It leads to the de-legitimization and destruction of the universe of meaning. Even below the threshold of a relationship's breakdown, personal development and outside interference can be assumed to pose a significant risk to the ability to continue maintaining mutually shared objectifications. That being said, this argument seems to be supported by empirical data. About half of all marriages end in separation and divorce. From the model presented here the main reasons for separation can be understood in a specific way. Conflict, lack of commitment, infidelity, and lack of emotional or physical intimacy all point to the underlying

process of having communicational, interactional, sexual, and emotional experiences within the private universe of meaning being disrupted, and finally stopped altogether. What partners then describe as "reasons" for separation and divorce are actually effects. However disparate these reasons to end a relationship may seem, they converge in a lack of mutual objectivation. They are manifestations of a failed agreement between partners to incite a self-referential process that in the end is subject to one function only: maintain the universe of meaning itself by keeping objectivations exclusive and private.

But it would be wrong to attribute all this to the shortcomings or unwillingness of the actors. Lovers enact their relationship in a highly complex environment—much more so than compared to pre-modern societies. Romantic relationships have changed significantly over the last 250 years. Current modernity incorporates the idea of individuality, of willingly complying even with engrossing institutionalizations. In the wake of this development, relationships are transformed into "confluent love." Confluent love basically constitutes a rational choice agreement in which each partner consents until further notice and is based on the individual benefits provided by the relationship (Giddens 1992). There are some obvious improvements that fall in line with these transformations, such as attention to sexual satisfaction and the (partial) dissolution of a gender-based power structure between lovers. But at the same time, love becomes an institution under the auspices of being deselection at any point. In the framework presented here, the inherent paradox of modern love can be understood differently. It seems entirely plausible that love, because it is private, represents a refuge from the anonymity of modernity, and thus satisfies a need for holistic relationships. At the same time, lovers are also children of their times and cannot fall behind the modern principles of individualization and risk assessment. Romance is based on the idea of (partially) surrendering personal freedom and the search for fulfillment in togetherness. Individuality must then be brought in line with the decision to submit to a relationship. In love contradictory forces work against each other, a process which results in establishing a universe of meaning but at the same time allows for it to be discontinued at any time. The fact that with the termination of a relationship, the relevance of anonymous institutions rises is an obvious and yet accepted paradox.

All this is not to ontologize romantic relationships. But with the framework presented here, it might be possible to better understand the strains and burdens lovers experience not just on a purely empirical, but on a conceptual level. While this conceptualization of love is theoretical first and foremost, empirical applications are close at hand. Thus, this paper is an invitation to discourse as it tries to understand one of society's key social interactions in a sociological manner.

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