

PASSIONATE LOVE AND MARITAL SATISFACTION AT KEY TRANSITION POINTS IN THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

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Measures of passionate love and marital satisfaction were administered to 59 couples, two months before and eight months after one of three major transitions: (a) engaged to married, (b) childlessness to parenthood, and (c) children living at home to empty nest. The sample was primarily white, college-educated professionals; the three groups had similar educational and occupational levels. Passionate love declined over the three transitions ($p < .001$) and from before to after each transition ($p < .05$). However, these differences were small in absolute terms and even the lowest mean indicated a moderate level of passionate love. The patterns of results remained even after controlling statistically for overall marital quality; however, a similar pattern of changes in marital quality did not remain after controlling for love.

Hatfield and Walster (1978) defined passionate love as "a state of intense longing for union with another" (p. 9). (These authors contrast passionate love with "companionate love," "the attention we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined," p. 9.) What is the course of passionate love over time? This question is important to both social psychologists concerned with understanding the role of love in close relationships, and to clinicians, especially marital therapists, who

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must deal with clients concerned about the love, or lack of it, in their relationships.

Some theorists (Kelley, 1983; Solomon, 1980; Sternberg, 1986) imply that passionate love inevitably declines rapidly. Others (Aron & Aron, 1986; Huesmann, 1980; Tesser & Paulhus, 1976) posit mechanisms that might permit individual differences in the pattern of intensity of love over time, though these theorists, except for Tesser and Paulhus, also predict an overall decline for most individuals.

Only a few previous studies have focused on the course of passionate love or a related construct over time. Two of these studies were cross-sectional. Traupmann and Hatfield (1981) found significantly but only slightly lower scores on a global passionate love item among women in their second 25 years of marriage, as compared to women in their first 25 years of marriage. Mathes and Wise (1983), in a study of both men and women, found no significant correlation between length of marriage, and number of items checked on Mathes' (1982) Romantic Symptoms Checklist. Three other relevant studies employed longitudinal designs. Pineo (1961) reported declines on self-report items on physical attraction and romantic feeling from engagement to 20 years later among 400 married couples. However, these declines were less than were found for marital satisfaction. Belsky, Lang, and Rovine (1983) found a linear, but not significant, decline in reported feelings of romance from just before to 9 months after the birth of the first child for 72 couples. Finally, Traupmann (1977) and Utne (1977) found declines on a global item of passionate love from the first year of marriage to the second year of marriage among 53 couples. However, the decline in passionate love was about the same as the decline in companionate love.

Overall, these studies suggest that declines in passionate love over the years are generally small, and that any such decline is of no greater magnitude than is found for more general measures of relationship quality. Studies which have focused on love generally (Cimbalo, Faling, & Mousaw, 1976; Cunningham & Antill, 1981; Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972; Filsinger, 1983; Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986; McHale & Huston, 1985; Reedy, Birren, & Schaie, 1981), as opposed to passionate love in particular, have yielded less consistent results, but the overall pattern is similar to what the studies cited in the preceding paragraph have described for passionate love.

There is also a large and theoretically-grounded literature on marital satisfaction over the course of a marriage, particularly studies focusing on major life transitions. For example, one body of work has centered

on the transition to parenthood (Belsky, 1985; Belsky, Lang, & Huston, 1986; Belsky et al., 1983; Dyer, 1963; Hobbs, 1965; McHale & Huston, 1985; Rossi, 1968; Ryder, 1973). The major thrust of this literature is that satisfaction declines across the transition to parenthood. Another emphasis has been the transition to the empty nest stage (Axelson, 1960; Burr, 1970; Figley, 1973; Harris, Ellicott, & David, 1986; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Feldman, 1970; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975). This literature has yielded differing results, although the preponderance of the evidence shows there is an increase in marital satisfaction after the last child leaves home.

The present study extends previous research on passionate love by (a) employing a psychometrically stronger measure of passionate love; (b) controlling statistically for concomitant changes in marital satisfaction; (c) examining key transition points in the family life cycle; and (d) focusing on the changes over about 10 months from before to after these transition points. The design combined cross-sectional (three different transition points) and longitudinal (from before to after each transition) approaches, following the recommendation of Schram (1979). Although we employed a relatively small sample, we felt that there was nevertheless sufficient power for any substantial patterns to emerge.

Theories of love and some previous research emphasize early declines in passionate love, so that one group studied was measured before and after marriage (Group 1). Reviews of marital research (e.g., Nock, 1979) suggest that presence or absence of children is a key variable. Thus the other two transition points studied were birth of first child (Group 2) and last child leaving home (Group 3).

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Volunteers were sought who were either about to be married, about to have their first child, or about to have their last child leave home. We recruited in three main ways: (a) using published lists of marriage license applicants and of parents of recent high school graduates, we telephoned potential participants and then mailed questionnaires to those who met the criteria and expressed a willingness to take part (about 3/5 of our subjects were obtained in this way); (b) we attended childbirth education and marriage preparation classes where we

distributed questionnaires to those attending who expressed a willingness to take part (about 1/5); and (c) we placed posters at appropriate locales (bridal fairs, maternity shops, parents' weekends, etc.) and then mailed questionnaires to those who telephoned to volunteer and met the criteria (about 1/5). Of those to whom we mailed or personally distributed questionnaires, 42% eventually returned both pre- and posttests. Unfortunately, our experience was that it was difficult to get subjects to participate in a study of marriage that involved a 10-month commitment and included questions on love. Thus, generalizations from this sample should be made with caution. On the other hand, the percentage of responses was approximately the same in each group, so that any such sampling bias probably does not interact with between-group conclusions. Furthermore, the completion rate for those who returned the pretest was reasonably high (71%) and similar across groups, so that systematic bias due to subject loss also does not seem to be a serious problem.

The analyses reported below are based entirely on the 59 couples in which both the husband and wife completed both the pre- and posttesting (Group 1: 23 couples; Group 2: 25 couples; Group 3: 11 couples). As described in the Results section, most analyses are conducted at the dyad level with husband-wife as a repeated measures factor. In the few cases where we treated each gender separately, we also limited the analyses to only those subjects in these 59 complete couples, permitting direct comparisons across analyses.

The sample was 88% white and college-educated, and most held professional-level jobs. Wives had attended a mean of 15.27 years of school, and husbands a mean of 15.68; 89.1% of wives and 76.8% of husbands held professional or administrative-level jobs. For the wives, mean age for Group 1 was 26.06; for Group 2, 28.50; for Group 3, 45.36. The corresponding mean ages for husbands were 27.64, 30.14, and 47.20. There were no significant differences among groups on years of education or occupational level. However, there were a disproportionate number of nonwhite (mainly Asians and Latinas) among Group 2 wives (9 of 25 were nonwhite, vs. 4 of 23 for Group 1, and 1 of 11 for Group 3 wives). However, there were no significant effects on any of the variables in a series of pre-post by white-nonwhite analyses of variance for the Group 2 couples. The ethnic distribution for husbands was more even. Eight couples were in second marriages—2 in Group 1, 3 in Group 2, and 3 in Group 3. For Group 3 second marriages, the shortest was 7 years and the longest 24, with all these couples having gone through a substantial portion of the childrearing period together.

MEASURES

Two main measures were employed. The Passionate Love Scale (PLS) short form, developed by Hatfield and Sprecher (1986), is a 15-item, Likert-scale questionnaire measuring thoughts, feelings, and behaviors characteristic of passionate love. The scale is based on the authors' review of the literature, other love and interpersonal attraction scales, and interviews. Example items are, "I would rather be with ____ than anyone else" and "I melt when looking deeply into ____'s eyes." Based on a sample of 120 undergraduates, *alpha* was reported as .91, and there was a nonsignificant correlation with a standard social desirability scale. For both men and women, the PLS was significantly correlated with Rubin's (1970) Love Scale, Rusbult's (1980) commitment scale, and satisfaction with the overall relationship and with the sexual aspect of the relationship. Discriminant validity was also good, with the PLS being significantly more highly correlated with a one-item measure of companionate love and more highly correlated with Rubin's Love Scale than with Rubin's Liking Scale or a trust scale. The PLS was also found to have an *alpha* of .97, and to correlate with conceptually similar measures and not to correlate with conceptually dissimilar measures, in a study of 424 undergraduates conducted by Hendrick and Hendrick (1989). In our sample of married individuals, *alpha* was .78 on the pretest administration and .89 on the posttest administration.

The other main measure used, The Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston et al., 1986), was employed as a general measure of perceived marital quality. It has two parts: (a) a 10-item semantic differential scale (of which only 8 are scored), and (b) one global question of marital satisfaction ("How satisfied are you with your marriage as a whole these days?"). A subject's score was the sum of the responses to the eight semantic differential items plus the global question. The Marital Opinion Questionnaire was derived from a similar instrument used by Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976). Huston et al. found that the sum of the semantic-differential scale items correlated highly with the global question ($r = .72$), and had an *alpha* of .80. Belsky et al. (1983) report *alphas* for this sum ranging from .87 to .94. In our sample, *alpha* was .92 at the pretest administration and .91 at the posttest administration; the correlation between the semantic-differential sum and the global question was .86 at both the pretest and posttest administrations. The Marital Opinion Questionnaire has been used a number of times by researchers looking at marital satisfaction across specific transition points in the family life cycle (Belsky, 1985; Belsky

et al., 1983; Huston et al., 1986). For purposes of the present study, most other marital satisfaction scales could not be used because their items are not always appropriate to couples who are not yet married (as was the case for those in the pretest of Group 1).

Two additional self-report measures developed by Miller (1976) were employed to provide subsidiary data: the Companionship Scale, which measures the number of different activities the couple has done together during the past month, and a global item about satisfaction with time spent together.

PROCEDURES

As described in the Subjects section, potential participants were either mailed or handed a packet of pretest questionnaires. Those who returned the pretest were later mailed the posttest packet. Each packet included two sets of questionnaires (with order of tests counterbalanced), two self-addressed stamped envelopes, and two sets of instructions. (The pretest questionnaire also included two consent forms.) The instructions with both the pretest and posttest packets emphasized that questionnaires should be completed in privacy, without consulting anyone (including their spouses). It seemed likely that all or almost all respondents did indeed fill out their questionnaires independently of their spouse, based on: our interactions with subjects; their consistency in returning the questionnaires in the separate envelopes provided for wife and husband; the fact that in most cases the separate envelopes arrived at different times; and our observations from reviewing closely the completed questionnaires for each couple.

Participants underwent their transition a mean of 1.9 months following completion of the pretest questionnaire and completed the posttest questionnaire a mean of 8.3 months after their transition, making a mean total time from pretest to posttest of 10.2 months. Although there was some variation in these times, there were no significant differences across groups in time before transition, time after, or total time. Further, of the 48 relevant correlations among the three time variables and the eight love and marital satisfaction variables (i.e., one pre- and one post- for each gender), none were significant.

RESULTS

MAJOR ANALYSES FOR LOVE AND SATISFACTION

Means for the PLS appear in the top section of Table 1. Perhaps the most important thing to note is that the overall level of reported

TABLE 1
Means (and Standard Deviations) for Passionate Love and Relationship
Satisfaction Scales

	GROUP 1: ENGAGED TO MARRIED (23 COUPLES)		GROUP 2: CHILDLESS TO PARENT (25 COUPLES)		GROUP 3: CHILDREN AT HOME TO EMPTY NEST (13 COUPLES)	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Passionate Love						
Wives	74.22 (6.84)	74.00 (6.92)	71.92 (5.79)	67.72 (10.31)	62.55 (12.77)	61.73 (15.24)
Husbands	73.48 (7.38)	72.78 (10.20)	68.64 (8.55)	67.48 (8.65)	61.00 (12.41)	58.55 (12.85)
Relationship Satisfaction						
Wives	49.37 (5.43)	48.00 (6.51)	45.52 (8.10)	43.32 (9.17)	40.64 (10.99)	42.55 (10.57)
Husbands	47.91 (6.57)	47.87 (4.80)	45.80 (6.36)	43.88 (6.31)	40.73 (11.73)	38.20 (6.73)

passionate love is high in all groups, before and after the transition. The lowest mean on the table is about 60, indicating these subjects' average response to the 15 passionate love items was about 4—"somewhat true." Also note that the mean PLS scores over groups and from before to after each transition are all in about the 60–75 range, with little apparent difference from before to after each transition.

Nevertheless, within this range, there did appear to be some reliable patterns. Thus, we conducted a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance, in which the independent variables were the three transition groups, the pre-versus posttesting, and husbands versus wives.¹ In these analyses, the couple was the between-subject unit of analysis, with gender and prepost as repeated measures factors (following Kenny, 1988). There was a significant main effect for group, $F(2,56) = 13.81$, $p < .001$.

1. We were concerned about the appropriateness of this analysis because (a) the distributions of scores on the Passionate Love Scale were negatively skewed, and (b) the cell variances (as can be seen from the standard deviations in Table 1) were quite discrepant from each other. Thus, as a check we conducted all of the analyses reported here also using transformed scores (the square root of the reflected score). After this transformation, the distributions were close to normal and the cell variances were approximately equal. Because the analyses based on these transformed scores yielded nearly identical results to those reported here, we report the analyses and means based on the untransformed scores for simplicity.

Planned contrasts indicated significantly higher PLS scores for Group 1 (marriage) than Group 2 (parenthood), $F(1,56) = 6.05, p < .05$; and higher scores for Group 2 than Group 3 (empty nest), $F(1,56) = 11.23, p < .01$. Pretest scores were higher overall than posttest scores, $F(1,56) = 5.04, p < .05$. Neither the gender effect nor any of the interactions reached or approached significance.

We also examined whether the significant differences in passionate love obtained in the above analysis would remain after controlling for marital satisfaction. This $3 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of covariance yielded virtually identical results to those obtained in the analysis not controlling for marital satisfaction. There was a main effect for Group, $F(2,55) = 8.55, p < .001$, with the same pattern of differences on the planned contrasts—higher PLS scores for Group 1 than Group 2, $F(1,55) = 3.93, p = .05$; and higher PLS scores for Group 2 than Group 3, $F(1,55) = 8.47, p < .01$. The analyses again found more passionate love before than after the transitions, $F(1,55) = 3.86, p = .055$. And once again, neither the gender effect nor any of the interactions reached or approached significance.

Means on the Marital Opinion Questionnaire itself appear in the bottom of Table 1. There was a significant difference among groups, $F(2,56) = 6.86, p < .01$, with both planned contrasts significant or near significant: Group 1 higher than Group 2, $F(1,56) = 4.71, p < .05$; and Group 2 higher than Group 3, $F(1,56) = 3.78, p = .057$. None of the other main effects or interactions reached or approached significance. However, when the same analysis was run controlling for passionate love scores, there were no significant effects.

There is an important asymmetry here. The pattern of significant results for passionate love remained largely unchanged when controlling for marital satisfaction. However, the similar pattern of results for marital satisfaction disappeared (ceased to reach significance) when controlling for passionate love. This asymmetry suggests that passionate love, and not marital satisfaction, may be the key variable associated with any differences over the stage of family life cycle.

AGE VERSUS MARRIAGE LENGTH

The observed relatively small, but significant, differences in levels of love over the three groups could be due to either length of marriage or age (as well as other possible effects), since both of these variables covaried with which group a subject was in. Indeed, because the overlap of marriage length and age with Group was so great, it was not

reasonable to conduct analyses controlling for these variables. It was possible, however, in some cases, to analyze the relation of love to age and marriage length by focusing on patterns within the groups.

In Groups 1 and 2, age was clearly negatively correlated with passionate love for wives ($r_s = -.53, p < .01$, and $-.35, p < .10$, respectively); but not for husbands ($-.27$ and $-.01$, both ns). (The N for Group 3 was too small to permit useful within-group correlations.) However, the correlations of marriage length with passionate love (which could only be conducted in Group 2, since Group 1 subjects were all newlyweds) did not reach or approach significance for either spouse. Nor did controlling for marriage length much affect the correlations with age. (Nor did controlling for marital satisfaction significantly affect any of the above correlations with passionate love.)

Projecting these correlations, which were obtained within groups, to the between-group differences, suggests that, for wives at least, age—and not marriage length—may play the more important role.

PATTERNS OF WIFE-HUSBAND DIFFERENCES IN PASSIONATE LOVE

Because couple data are rare, we carried out some additional analyses focusing on couple differences in passionate love. In the major analyses reported above (the anovas and ancovas), the couple was the between-subject unit of analysis, with gender as a repeated-measures factor. Thus, any association of wife-minus-husband differences with transition period or with pre- versus post transition change would have shown up as an interaction of gender with that effect. As was noted above, none of the interactions with gender reached or approached significance in those analyses.

It was nevertheless possible that wife-husband differences, ignoring which one was higher or lower, might be associated with one of the other variables in the study. Thus, we conducted a 3 (group) \times 2 (pre-post) analysis of variance, in which absolute value of the wife-husband difference was the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect for group, $F(2,56) = 11.47, p < .001$, in which there was least difference in love at the transition to marriage (M before = 5.52 , after = 9.30), more at the transitions to parenthood ($6.80, 10.40$), and still more for empty nest ($13.54, 18.45$). The increase in difference in love from before to after the transitions was also significant, $F(1,56) = 5.41, p < .05$. The interaction was not significant. A parallel analysis for absolute differences in love, controlling for satisfaction differences,

yielded an identical pattern of means and significant effects. (An analysis of absolute husband-wife differences in marital satisfaction did not yield any significant results.)

ANALYSES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY MEASURES OF TIME SPENT TOGETHER

For the Companionship Scale (number of different activities shared), a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance yielded a significant main effect for group, $F(2,56) = 4.33, p < .05$; which was qualified by a significant interaction with gender, $F(2,56) = 3.14, p = .05$. Both genders reported progressively fewer shared activities over Groups 1 through 3, but the difference between 1 and 2 was greater for wives, while the difference between 2 and 3 was greater for husbands. In addition, subjects reported participating in more shared activities before than after the transitions, $F(1,56) = 10.66, p < .01$. None of the other effects were significant. In the corresponding $3 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis for satisfaction with time spent together, the only significant result was a group \times pre-post interaction, $F(2,56) = 3.77, p < .05$ —an increase from before to after marriage, but little change over the other two transitions.

DISCUSSION

Passionate love appears to remain fairly high over much of the course of marriage, although there is a pattern of lower scores at subsequent transition points and of small declines from before to after each transition. Although previous studies have yielded generally similar results, the present study was the first to employ a comprehensive design (both cross-sectional and longitudinal over major marital milestones) and a psychometrically strong measure of passionate love. It was also the first to demonstrate that associations with passionate love remain even after controlling for scores on a general measure of marital satisfaction.

Taking into account both the present results and the earlier findings, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the assumption of some theories that there is an inevitable and precipitous decline in passionate love. Furthermore, at least for women, our data suggest that the small differences in passionate love at different transition points that are observed may well be due to age or cohort effects, not marriage length.

An especially interesting aspect of the results of this study is that they were not much affected by controlling for overall marital satisfaction. This is the first direct indication of which we are aware that passionate love plays an independent role in marriage, over and above

marital satisfaction. Satisfaction implies a lack of problems and a general well-being, while passionate love implies a focused, intense attention with high affect. Thus, it is quite possible that passionate love could be a more potent variable in a variety of contexts than marital satisfaction. Further, there was even some indication that passionate love may in fact be the central, active ingredient in measures of marital satisfaction. That is, if effects associated with marital satisfaction disappear when controlling for passionate love, it may be that passionate love was the operative variable. Since marital satisfaction is the most widely studied dependent variable in the marriage literature, this possibility certainly deserves additional research attention.

Of course, there are a number of methodological limitations of the present study that bear special attention. Any conclusion about changes in passionate love across our three groups (though not the pre-post changes) must be qualified by the cross-sectional nature of the comparison. The possibility that only couples who are in love remain married that long cannot be ruled out—although there is evidence that couples can remain married for a great many years and not be deeply in love (e.g., Cuber & Haroff, 1963). Another complication in this study was that the children-oriented stages of the family life cycle are not as rigid now as they were when the family life cycle idea was first conceptualized 45 years ago (Duvall & Hill, 1948). Finally, caution is required in making generalizations from this convenience sample, especially generalizations to less well-educated populations.

In spite of these limitations, for the social psychologist these data suggest possible directions for reexamination of existing theory about the course of passionate love over time; and for the clinician, especially the marital therapist, they suggest caution in reassuring clients that passionate love inevitably declines, and possibly putting more attention on the topic as part of the treatment process. Finally, for just ordinary romantics, this study gives some basis for the hope that passionate love really can last forever—it may decline on the average, but the decline seems not inevitable, and when it does occur, it may not be very large.

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