Women and Men in Love: Who Really Feels It and Says It First?

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ABSTRACT. A widely held belief exists that women are more romantic and tend to fall in love faster than men. Responses from 172 college students indicated that although both men and women believe that women will fall in love and say “I love you” first in a relationship, men reported falling in love earlier and expressing it earlier than women reported. Analyses also showed no sex differences in attitudinal responses to items about love and romance. These results indicate that women may not be the greater “fools for love” that society assumes and are consistent with the notion that a pragmatic and cautious view of love has adaptive significance for women.

Keywords: evolution, I love you, love, romance, sex differences

LOVE HAS BEEN CALLED “the deepest and most meaningful of sentiments” (Rubin, 1970), although what constitutes “love” can have a myriad of meanings, ranging from concepts involving an initial state of attraction, to falling in love, to being/staying in love (Aron et al. 2008). Yet even though it is difficult to define falling in love, and the consideration of such may not ever rise entirely above subjectivity (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Sternberg & Weis, 2006), researchers have commented that almost everyone can relate to being or falling in love (Esch & Stefano, 2005; Stefano & Esch, 2007).

How love is expressed and experienced may differ between women and men. With respect to the expression of love, surprisingly little research has focused on the locution “I love you,” even though these three small words appear to be a critical delineation in relationships (Owen, 1987), as such expressions of...
affection are thought to be decisive moments for the advancement of romantic relationships (Baxter & Braithewaite, 2008). Researchers have indicated that cross-culturally, females tend to use the locution “I love you” more than males (Wilkins & Gareis, 2006). This is not surprising, since evidence suggests that women and men differ in their expression of emotions and in their descriptions of related cognitions (Barbara, 2008). Women tend to be more expressive in relationships, and women are expected by others to be more expressive (Rubin, 1970; Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2007), particularly in instances of romantic love (Durik et al., 2006). Interestingly, women appear to enjoy a neurological advantage in terms of processing multisensory, emotional experiences (Collignon et al. 2010); this is likely one reason why women are faster at perceiving others’ emotions (Hampson, van Anders, & Mullin, 2006) and have more confidence than do men when expressing affection, liking, and love to the opposite sex (Blier & Blier-Wilson, 1989). In contrast, due to their “inexpressiveness and restrictive emotionality” (Blier & Blier-Wilson, 1989, p. 287) men may experience intimacy, parenting, and relationship problems (Dosser, 1982; Balswick, 1988).

Despite men’s purported emotional restriction, however, a few older studies have shown that men report saying “I love you” first in a relationship (Owen, 1987; Brantley, Knox, & Zusman, 2002). Owen (1987) posited that this transpires because men are socialized to take the initiative in relationships, and that this verbal declaration may prompt women to reciprocate this iteration and commit prematurely to a relationship. Brantley, Knox, and Zusman (2002) interpreted this through an evolutionary lens, positing that men use this locution first in a relationship as an inroad to sexual access. In support of Brantley and colleagues’ theory, Tucker, Marvin, and Vivian (1991) noted that women listed their partners’ expressions of “I love you” in their top 10 romantic acts, but men did not. If men possess knowledge that women find “I love you” to be romantic, men may communicate what their partners want to hear so as to advance a relationship sexually and/or emotionally. This makes sense evolutionarily, as women in our ancestral environment, who have few gametes compared to men, would have benefitted from pair-bond assurance more than would males (Symons, 1979) and saying “I love you” appears to communicate a commitment. Moreover, men place a greater premium on sex than women do (Buss, 2004, 2006), and this is theorized to be the case because of the reproductive advantage that sex with multiple women confers to men, who have a virtually unlimited supply of sperm. Thus, any strategy serving as the means to a sexual end would be beneficial to men, including declarations of love. With this in mind, then, one might wonder if the public’s perception of women as the more romantic sex (Hatfield & Walster, 1978; Hyde & Delamater, 2009) might simply be due to the fact that men report being and are perceived as more sexual than are women, and are therefore viewed as less romantic.

It should be noted, however, that men may have a different sexual attitude toward long-term, committed partners than they do toward short-term, sex-only
partners. Evidence shows that men and women report similar preferences for a long-term partner who is kind, intelligent, and understanding, and one who loves them in return (Buss, 2007).

In terms of romance, a widely-held stereotype in our society contends that women are more romantic than are men, although older data from college students show men to have a greater number of romantic attitudes than women do (Knox & Sporakowski, 1968). Further, researchers have reported that men fall in love earlier than do women (Kanin, Davidson, & Schreck, 1970; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 2004). Even adolescent boys seem to fall in love earlier than do adolescent girls (Montgomery & Sorrell, 1998), and these individuals are at an age when passionate love is thought to be more intense (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Although at what age we fall in love for the first time has been the topic of scientific scrutiny (e.g., Montgomery & Sorrell, 1998; Reagan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureno, & Rea, 2004), the exact timeframe of falling in love (e.g., hours, days, weeks, months into a relationship) is difficult to study empirically because of the retrospective nature of the question. Perhaps this is why this not been extensively explored in previous studies.

Much of the seminal research of “love” was conducted more than a generation ago (e.g., 1960s, 1970s). The present study used a contemporary sample of college students in an attempt to determine if there has been a social change in this phenomenon. Our study attempts to replicate, integrate, and extend upon previous work on which sex falls in love first, when they fall in love, and who says, “I love you” first. This study also sought to examine if women’s perceptions of love and romance are really that different from men’s perceptions by asking questions about these phenomena, thus attempting to dispel the popular notion that women are hopeless romantics and support the notion that women are careful, comparison shoppers in terms of relationships.

Method

All procedures were approved by the local Institutional Review Board. A 28-item internet-based instrument was created to assess similarities and differences between men’s and women’s attitudes, expectations, and experiences with respect to love and relationships. As researchers have reported that first- and second-year college students have an expected high incidence of falling in love (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995), the choice of a college sample was appropriate for the purposes of this study. We attempted to obtain a diverse sample by recruiting participants from the subject pool of a mid-sized university and by recruiting volunteer respondents from a large community college in a major metropolitan city in the northeastern United States. Of the 188 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 10 did not indicate their sex and were excluded from analysis. Although of interest, the sample of homosexual and bisexual respondents was not large enough for analysis, and therefore the data from seven individuals (6 men and 1 woman) who
reported preferring to date and have sex with men and women equally, mostly the same sex, or only the same sex were excluded from the analysis to control for error variance. The resulting sample of 171 heterosexual individuals consisted of 72 men and 99 women with a mean age of 20.28 ($SD = 5.25$). Ethnicities reported were: 77.1% White, 13.0 % Asian, 5.3% Black, 3.5% Hispanic, and 1.1% Other.

Results

Analyses revealed that 61 men (84.72%) and 88 (90.90%) women reported they had been involved in a committed, romantic relationship at some point in their lives, with no sex difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 171) = 1.54, p > .214$, N.S. Additionally, 27 men (38.02%) and 56 women (56.57%) reported that they were currently involved in a committed, romantic relationship and this sex difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 170) = 5.69, p < .017$. Of people who were currently in relationships, most men (91.30%) and women (98.21%) reported being “in love” with their partner, with no sex difference in frequency, $\chi^2(1, N = 76) = 2.13, p > .144$.

As this study was interested in relationship dynamics, only responses from those with previous relationship experience were included in subsequent analyses. Participants were asked, “In your most recent romantic relationship, how long did it take you to realize you were in love?” Answer choices were: 1 = “I am not in love,” 2 = “Immediately,” 3 = “A few days,” 4 = “A few weeks,” 5 = “A few months,” 6 = “A year,” and 7 = “More than a year.” Men ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.23$) reported falling in love more quickly than women ($M = 5.01, SD = .99$) reported falling in love, $t(127) = 2.74, p < .007, d = .48$. In addition, in response to the question, “In your most recent committed, romantic relationship, who said ‘I love you’ first?” only 12.10% reported that neither partner did. Among those for whom this was expressed, there was a relationship to sex, with 64% of men compared to 18.51% of women reporting they said “I love you” to their partner first, $\chi^2(1, N = 131) = 27.80, p < .000$.

Participants were also asked, “Who falls in love first in a relationship, a man or a woman?” Interestingly, 87.78% of participants believed that a woman falls in love first in a relationship, $\chi^2(1, N = 131) = 74.82, p < .000$, and this response was unrelated to sex, $\chi^2(1, N = 131) = .939, p > .332$. Participants were further asked, “Do you think a man or a woman is more likely to say ‘I love you’ first in a relationship?” Results showed that 75.20% of participants believed that a woman is more likely to express this sentiment first, $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 31.75, p < .000$, and there was no relationship to sex, $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 2.04, p > .153$.

Participants were asked, “About how far into a relationship would you be able to tell you were in love?” and “About how far into a relationship would you be able to tell your partner was in love?” Answer choices were presented on a Likert-type scale: 1 = “Immediately”; 2 = “A few days”; 3 = “A few weeks”; 4 = “A few months”; 5 = “A year”; and 6 = “More than a year.” Women anticipated
knowing they were in love with a partner ($M = 4.00, SD = .67$) later than men anticipated knowing they were in love ($M = 3.62, SD = 1.14$), $t(148) = 2.54, p < .012$, $d = .41$, and women anticipated being able to tell their partner was in love with them later ($M = 4.09, SD = .80$) than men anticipated being able to tell ($M = 3.70, SD = .99$), $t(147) = 2.63, p < .009$, $d = .43$. However, both sexes reported anticipating they would know they were in love with a partner the same time they knew their partners were in love with them [women: $t(87) = 1.82, p = .072$; men: $t(60) = .820, p = .416$]. Participants were also asked, “How far into a committed, romantic relationship would you want to have sex with a partner?” The same scale reported above was used for responses. Women reported a desire to wait longer to have sex ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.14$) than men reported ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.18$), $t(147) = 2.15, p < .034$, $d = .35$ Additional analyses showed that men’s responses indicated that they anticipated wanting to have sex at the same time they would know they were in love, $t(59) = 1.01, p < .318$, and that their partners were in love, $t(59) = 1.61, p < .112$. Women’s responses indicated they also anticipated wanting to have sex at the same time they would know they were in love, $t(87) = 1.39, p < .167$, and their responses indicated they would want to have sex before knowing their partners were in love, $t(86) = 2.19, p < .031$, but a Bonferroni correction to alpha for multiple comparisons renders this result non-significant.

Participants were then presented with a series of statements about love, dating, romance, sex, and physical attraction, and were asked to report on a scale the degree to which they agreed with each statement, with again, 1 = “Totally disagree”; 2 = “Slightly disagree”; 3 = “Neither agree nor disagree”; 4 = “Slightly agree”; and 5 = “Totally agree.” When employing a Bonferroni correction to alpha for multiple comparisons, there were no sex differences in responses to any questions about love and romance. Results are presented in Table 1.

### Discussion

In our contemporary college sample, nearly 9 out of 10 people who have had relationship experience expressed that it is likely a woman who will fall in love first in a relationship. Further, 7 out of 10 people believed that a woman will say, “I love you” first. However, our data showed that men reported falling in love sooner and that three times as many men as women said, “I love you” first to their partners. These results show no change from those in older studies (e.g., Dion & Dion, 1973) in that men report falling in love and saying it first. This suggests that women tend to be more pragmatic about love than society tends to believe, i.e., not rushing fool heartedly into a relationship. The emergence of the locution “I love you” in relationship vocabulary is important, as emotional narration can offer a window into the speaker’s affective state (Barbara, 2008). It can be argued that men’s falling in love and exclaiming this love first may be explained as a byproduct of men equating love with sexual desire, as evidence suggests that men are more interested in sex than are women (see Buss, 2006). However,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Men ($n = 72$) $M (SD)$</th>
<th>Women ($n = 100$) $M (SD)$</th>
<th>$t(df)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romantic love is a biological trick to get you to reproduce.</td>
<td>2.53 (1.32)</td>
<td>2.04 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.69 (170)</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You really need to get to know someone’s personality before you can be in love with them.</td>
<td>4.32 (.80)</td>
<td>4.57 (.66)</td>
<td>2.20 (169)</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love at first sight exists.</td>
<td>3.08 (1.20)</td>
<td>3.08 (1.20)</td>
<td>.015 (167)</td>
<td>.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love is a waste of time.</td>
<td>1.85 (1.10)</td>
<td>1.39 (.82)</td>
<td>3.10 (169)</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My being in love is important to me.</td>
<td>3.76 (1.04)</td>
<td>3.89 (1.14)</td>
<td>.758 (169)</td>
<td>.450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attraction fades over time.</td>
<td>2.90 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.61 (1.08)</td>
<td>1.67 (170)</td>
<td>.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in love fades over time.</td>
<td>2.46 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.32 (1.10)</td>
<td>.791 (170)</td>
<td>.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a fool for love.</td>
<td>2.86 (1.25)</td>
<td>3.20 (1.28)</td>
<td>1.74 (169)</td>
<td>.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I become more and more in love with the person I am attracted to.</td>
<td>3.88 (96)</td>
<td>3.98 (.91)</td>
<td>.73 (170)</td>
<td>.467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I become more and more physically attracted to the person I love.</td>
<td>4.08 (1.12)</td>
<td>4.31 (.84)</td>
<td>1.47 (167)</td>
<td>.143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* No differences were significant after employing a Bonferroni correction to alpha for multiple comparisons. Answers were given on a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 = “Totally disagree”; 2 = “Slightly disagree”; 3 = “Neither agree nor disagree”; 4 = “Slightly agree”; and 5 = “Totally agree.”
researchers have proposed that passionate love and sexual desire are distinctly different mechanisms (see Reis & Aron, 2008), and our data showed that men and women showed equivocal agreement that they become increasingly physically attracted to someone with whom they are in love, indicating an understanding of the difference. Again, evidence does suggest that people in North American culture (from which our sample was obtained) can relate to what it means to fall in love (Aron et al., 2008).

Our results indicated that when asked to speculate, women reported anticipating they would know they were in love with a partner in about a few months and that they would also know the feeling was mutual within a few months. This was significantly later than the timeline indicated by men who reported anticipating knowing they were in love and knowing their partner’s mutual feelings in about a few weeks to a few months. These findings are novel and provide support that women do not rush into a romance before men do. Additionally, neither sex indicated an expected temporal difference between realizing one’s own and one’s partner’s feelings. This further indicates that women are not hopeless romantics engulfed in unrequited or unsure love any more or less than are men.

Most men and women in our study reported being involved in a committed relationship before, and almost all who were in romantic relationships at the time of participation reported being in love with their partners. As in previous research, men’s reports of when they fell in love with their partners indicated that they did so sooner than women’s reports indicated they did. However, unlike previous studies, our data highlighted a timeline, whereby men reported falling in love with their most recent, committed partner in about a few weeks to a few months, and women reported falling in love in about a few months. These findings corroborate our data, as mentioned above, that show men are more likely than women to say, “I love you” first to their partners.

Not surprisingly, women in our study reported a preference to engage in first sex later in new relationship (a few months into it) than men’s reported preference (a few weeks to a few months into it), but both sexes reported a desire to have sex at the same time they were certain of their own and their partner’s feelings. This suggests that women, relative to men, are making more careful assessments of their partners before committing sexually and emotionally to a relationship.

Interestingly, other than the above, our data indicated no significant differences between the sexes, revealing that women’s general viewpoints (including cynical beliefs, e.g., “Love is a waste of time”) about love, dating, and romance, are not different than those of men. These data reveal a trend for women which apparently goes against the popular belief that women are more romantic and idealistic about love than are men. There were no sex differences in agreement to statements such as, “Love at first sight exists,” “My being in love is important to me,” “Physical attraction fades over time,” “Being in love fades over time,” and “I am a fool for love.” These data show that women are not greater fools for love than are men as is the common societal stereotype, and are not, as Heiss (2005)...
reported, “handicapped in the competition” (p. 575). In fact, these data arguably show that both sexes are equally as pragmatic and as foolish about love.

It is curious why the belief that women are fools for love persists, as the notion that women should logically and realistically view love and commitment follows evolutionary theory that women need to be discriminative in their mate choices due to their relatively limited reproductive capabilities (Symons, 1979). That is, it is reproductively advantageous for a woman to be tentative and not simply jump into a sexual or romantic relationship until she is sure of her partner’s intent to commit, as this would have assured resources and protection in the ancestral environment which was likely not very female-friendly.

Still, alternative explanations may exist for such beliefs and therefore our findings. Who says what to whom and at what time in a relationship may simply be learned from others as appropriate or inappropriate. Personal perceptions and cognitions of sex roles likely lead men and women to behave in love relationships as they feel they are expected to behave. For example, it may be part of a man’s gender schema (Bem, 1981) to be the one to facilitate the solidification of a relationship by stating “I love you” first. Likewise, it may be enmeshed in a woman’s gender schema to wait for the man in a relationship to make such a move first. Societal expectations may dictate and place pressure upon men and women to act accordingly as well, likely beginning very early in life, and messages on how men and women “typically” behave as their respective genders are presented though the family, school, friends, and media (for discussion, see Mascionis, 2004, p. 250). As beliefs can be culturally transmitted, however, they can create selection pressures for behavioral adaptations (Confer et al., 2010).

With respect to interpreting the findings of the present study through an evolutionary framework, perhaps it is men who expressed love to their partners first that left more descendants than men who did not, and likewise, perhaps it is women who waited for men to make the first move left more descendants. It seems plausible that both evolutionary and cultural theory can come into play when interpreting the results presented herein.

There are admitted limitations to the present study. First, participants’ responses, as is the case with any self-report research, may reflect inaccuracies due to social desirability, difficulties with estimates, and problems with retrospective judgments (Hyde & DeLamater, 2009). Future studies might involve longitudinal assessments of individuals who have recently become romantically involved, recording progression of love experiences and expressions. For example, a diary study would allow fairly accurate determination of the time frame and expression of love feelings. In addition, the love and romance experiences of college men and women from the northeastern United States may not represent the psychology of men and women in all cultures. As such, additional research may wish to replicate these findings in other countries.

In conclusion, our data show that women tend to be more cautious about love and the expression thereof than what is commonly believed. Perhaps women are perceived as less rational about love compared to men because women have
a greater capacity for processing emotional experiences (Collignon et al., 2010) and have a more emotionally expressive nature than do men (Rubin, 1970; Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2007; Barbara, 2008). If this is the case, then the stereotype of women as hopeless romantics compared to men will likely persist even in the face of scientific evidence to the contrary.

**AUTHOR NOTES**

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