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First Love: A Case Study in Quantitative Appropriation of Social Concepts

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Abstract

Peer love is a highly invested autobiographical marker, and its scientific ascent can be studied in terms of its literature's motives, stated objectives, exclusions, and delimitations. In this article an overview of numeric and selected ethnographic data on the timing of "first love" is presented, to inform an assessment of the ontological underpinnings of milestone research common to quantitative sociology and developmental psychology. Complicating scientific normalization of love's initiatory connotation, selected ethnographic observations on the timing and notion of early/first love in non-Western societies are presented. These observations facilitate a critique of love as a heterosocial, propaedeutic event, and hence, as scientifically accessible and befitting the routines and metaphors of biomedical "milestone monitoring."

Keywords

Age of First Love, First Crush, Critique of Quantitative Methods, Ethnography, Literature Review, and Adolescence

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First Love: A Case Study in Quantitative Appropriation of Social Concepts

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Peer love is a highly invested autobiographical marker, and its scientific ascent can be studied in terms of its literature's motives, stated objectives, exclusions, and delimitations. In this article an overview of numeric and selected ethnographic data on the timing of "first love" is presented, to inform an assessment of the ontological underpinnings of milestone research common to quantitative sociology and developmental psychology. Complicating scientific normalization of love's initiatory connotation, selected ethnographic observations on the timing and notion of early/first love in non-Western societies are presented. These observations facilitate a critique of love as a heterosocial, propaedeutic event, and hence, as scientifically accessible and befitting the routines and metaphors of biomedical "milestone monitoring." Key Words: Age of First Love, First Crush, Critique of Quantitative Methods, Ethnography, Literature Review, and Adolescence

My sister comes in. Her eyes are full of sorrow. She sings to me, "When the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls, someone thinks of me..." I doze, thinking of plums, walls, and "someone." (Morrison, 1970, p. 7)

Studying love, not in the least its first occurrences, constitutes an interesting phenomenological oxymoron. Who would ever need to define, delimit, its enchanting appeal, its poetic necessity, its humanizing agency? Moreover, who could ever "measure" its occurrences, render it commensurable?

A range of approaches to love-related phenomena does allow an analysis of Western love's discursive association to its timing as normal, appropriate, or possible: psychoanalysis, human ethology, ethnology, psychoneuroendocrinology, symbolic interactionism, linguistics, and social constructionism (Janssen, 2003, II, ch. 15). In this paper I propose a critique of the exacting science of "first love," arguing that this informs a more general critique of the milestone trope in developmental studies. My objections can be formulated as follows. First, chronometric approaches by definition propose to neutralize the highly idiosyncratic status culturally reserved for mental states per se and for highly invested autobiographical markers more specifically, and (thus) these approaches seem to antagonize (or in fact ignore) the widely recognized charisma and humanizing properties of "personal" milestones in Western developmental theory. "First love" arguably qualifies triply here.

Second, the motivated, occasioned nature of research may be obscured by implicit or explicit claims to objectivity. This may entail, as will be suggested below, the tacit introduction of exclusions, centric operationalizations, and a reductive evaluation of scientific salience.

Lastly, the quantitative paradigm fails to address any existing developmental, ethnographic, ethnolinguistic, and discursive ambiguities of love, as well as of the eventual connotation of its “first occurrence.” In other words, it fails to address the process and performance of biography, in which, for instance, psychological states are “worked up” as salient events and as markers of existential or social “growth,” “ascent,” or “development.” Clearly being-in-love is not as unproblematically eventful as a (first) kiss (Regan, Shen, de la Peña, & Gosset, 2007). Thus, quantification may paradoxically render problematic any attempt to compare the “timing” of personal events, at least as studied through diverse research schemes.

My objections, then, take issue with the commonly made distinction of qualitative findings and quantitative data or givens, and the proposition that the former may supplement, “broaden the evidence base” of (e.g., Barbour, 2000), or ideally be “incorporated” (Pearson, 2004) in, quantitative overviews. Qualitative research may, more radically, suggest that research results are neither simply found (encountered) or given (collected), more specifically that quantitative aggregation of results as such entails the methodological proposition or tacit acceptance or assumption of conventional ways of representation. Representation is left out of the analysis. That is to say; what is being pinpointed in time may be crucially entangled with the act (in research contexts we must say: *occasion*, or better: *occasioning*) of the pinpointing, and thus with its context, format, purpose. The value of qualitative approaches focusing on narrative-in-context, and narrative-in-action allows the emergence of objective ontologies of what is pinpointable, and what properties facilitate anchorage-in-time. Asking for being-in-love-for-the-first-time, are we “getting at” affective, experiential, cognitive, relational, existential, mnemonic, discursive, biographic, or yet other processes? Standardizing the process of chronometry in life narratives does not so much compromise validity as evade the establishment of what there is to be measured; what processes and what applications of time may be triggered by researcher occasioning of temporal anchoring. Qualitative research, and in a more general sense Western philosophy, has long focused on exactly these questions (What is an event? What is time? How do we relate to events and time?).

Below, I briefly identify quantitative studies, propose a critique, and inform this critique with ethnographic research from a range of sources. It is not among my intentions to advance a full meta-review or more inclusive developmental theory of love, or of love in the occidental reading, other than hinting at its widely tolerated scientific containments. Methodologically, in qualitative data the essentially quantitative question of timing breaks down into a range of observations that deconstruct its being answered in conventional ways, for instance in terms of “mean age” among mean ages. This paper then is an appraisal of how quantitative operations envelop social interaction. As suggested above, this makes the study of research on love’s timing coextensive with appraisals of the medicalization, sexualization, developmentalization, and sociologization of 20th century “human” or “individual” trajectories. I introduce these historical strands of confinements below, followed by an appraisal of actual studies, and a limited exposé of qualitative findings.

Historicizing Quantitative Research

Three motives (psychodiagnostic, secularized ethical, and pedagogical) historically inform Euro-American quantitative research on love debut; first, an early 20th century pediatric and psychoanalytic interest to differentiate “pathological” (pathologically orientated, early, delayed, intense, absent) from physiological occurrences of displays of affection and affiliation (at times canonically aimed at restoring “ordinary human unhappiness”); then, a second half 20th century often family-oriented focus on adolescent heterosocial romanticism, and its correlation with psychosocial functioning, sexual debut and adult mental health outcome; and lastly, a 1970/80s need to substantiate psychosocial developmental models that were to guide sensible forms of mentorship of the new pedagogical entity of “the homosexual adolescent.”

Every theory introduces phenomenological reduction and closure. A typical example of the second (biomedical) entry is a study by Hearn, O’Sullivan, and Dudley (2003) which is concerned with health risk assessment in the face of increasing urban rates of HIV, and consequently addresses girls’ crushes and love as “low-risk aspects of their sexuality.” Characteristic of this literature’s ethically informed risk paradigm, Montgomery (2005, p. 237) locates her measures of adolescent romantic involvement among “the diverse array of specific indices of positive adjustment and optimal [psychosocial] functioning.” The pragmatic implications of this study (Montgomery, p. 370) remain entirely in the realm of the abstract, however.

Most studies of the third mentioned generation, to be precise, did not report on falling in love, but on sexological, cognitive, and social variables (first felt attraction, erotic fantasy, sexual experience, identity “awareness” or “realization” or “self-labeling,” disclosure, and “relationship”). Illustratively, 1990s research by Hamer on adult male homosexuality defined first crush as “thoughts about another person that you can now identify as at least partially sexual” (as cited in DuPree, 2002, p. 44; the mean age was 9.8 years). It is interesting to see that a crush here is explicitly operationalized as the result of a required “backreading” sexualizing a prior instance of ideation. The absence of “love” in this historical episode of sociological monitoring clearly points to an analytic differential between the ontology of heterosexuality and that of homosexuality. A crush’s at least “partial” relevance would be sexological, and thus be partial to some “normal homosexual timeline.”

In sum, late 20th century frameworks for studying love are sexuality (or sexual acts) and contemporarily a variably abstract, developmentalist, and ethical understanding of health, that is to say, “positive functioning” and “adjustment.” For a large part, this has to be historicized as befitting the 1960s American systematization of sexology (originally conceived in late 19th century Europe), and its expansive social function in a variety of theoretical and social justice issues to emerge in the ensuing decades. Love before the 1960s was a notion delimited by the structures that provided stability to immediate post-war economy; love, as sex, was either dangerously “premarital” or productively marital. In the 1960s Broderick legitimized his studies by the observation that “new patterns are emerging which promise to revolutionize boy-girl relationships at these ages” in America of the late 1950s.

We set ourselves the task of documenting the emergence of new norms in the relationships between the sexes among youth 10-13 years of age [...]. While old patterns of hostility and withdrawal are not dead, new behaviors and relationships are developing, based on a greater understanding and sharing of value orientations. (Broderick & Fowler, 1961, pp. 27, 30)

This structural sociological line has continued to evaluate such variables as passionate love, however increasingly in terms of psychological and psychosocial “functioning.” Studies after the 1970s were predominantly occasioned from sexological, particularly biological, clinical, and preventative health perspectives. Lastly, in the 1990s we see ethnographic methods deployed to assess early love from a gender-ecological and school-ecological perspectives, focusing on performative, interactional, and discursive aspects. These perspectives tend to see time bracketing and chronological demarcation as an active rhetorical stance, answering to norms, conventions, and perceived opportunities (Janssen in press); Accordingly, the disambiguating idea of a “first occurrence” may be considered a discursive move rather than a pivotal event.

Quantitative Studies

In Table 1, collected are 41 studies reporting on “first,” “early,” and pre-pubertal love, identifying their geographic setting, operationalizations, methods, samples as well as age and gender specificity. This overview pertains to retrospective self-reports and does not include inquires into perceived age norms or biographic salience (few of these were encountered however, e.g., Habermas, 2007). Studies were mostly identified during a semi-systematic, cross-cultural review project (Janssen, 2003), primarily through meta-platform, meta- and multi-database,¹ and multi-language (West-European) phrase-based searches. This method can not claim to be exhaustive; however it sheds a preliminary light on the range of academic effort by which love is made legible as a temporizable event. Most encountered publications on first love reported in English are from the U.S. and Europe, and rarely include subjects under age 10. Most studies have large samples and deploy structured tools.

Table 1

First, Pre- and Peri-Pubertal “Love”: Major and Numeric Studies

Locality	Reference	Age specificity of data (years)	Gender specificity of data	N	Variable	Methods *	Sample, age (years)
Australia	Perkins (1991)	<15	G	128 +11	Age at onset of	Q	Prostitutes vs

¹ Including: EBSCOHOST databases, SAGE Publications, Haworth, Metapress, JSTOR, AIO, Proquest databases including Fulltext Dissertations, Wilson OmniFile (Mega), Springer, ScienceDirect, Google (including Scholar and Books), Periodicals Archive Online, Netlibrary, Ebrary.

				5 +12 0	first love affair / Falling in love		health- workers vs students
Austria	Nöstlinger & Wimmer- Puchinger (1994)	Mean	BG	1,1 08	First being-in- love		Adoles- cents, <i>M</i> =17.15
Canada	Brendgen et al. (2002)	–	BG	312	“Having a boy/girl- friend”	Q	7th graders (11–15), <i>M</i> =13.25
China	Haque (2002)	Mean, range	BG	50+ 50	“First love”	GI	Chinese and Malay Chinese above age 50, <i>M</i> =62+5 6
Czecho- slovakia	Raboch (1986)	Mean?	G	101	“First falling in love”	SI	Control group vs psychia- tric patients, <i>M</i> =32.6
Germany	Sigusch & Schmidt (1973)	Accumula- tive % from age 12	BG	602	Being in love	Q	16–17
	Schlaegel (1975); Schoof- Tams et al. (1976)	Accumula- tive % from age 11	BG	1,9 14	Being in love	I;P,DA, DP [Q]	11–16
	Georg (1992)	?	BG	1,4 72+ 1,3	Falling in love for the first	Q	15–24

				72	time		
	Silbereisen & Schwarz (1998); Silbereisen & Wiesner (2000)	y/n; median (survival analysis)	BG	1,561+909	First falling in love, first “steady friendship”	I	13–19 ($M=16.5$, $SD=2.1$), 1991 vs 1996 samples, former-East vs former-West
Holland	Laan, Rademakers & Straver (1996); Rademakers, Laan & Straver (2000)	[8–9]	BG	31	Being in love	SSI, PQ	Children and parents
Iceland	Jónsson et al. (2000)	Mean, SD	BG	122 vs 29	Age at first love affair	Q	Students 20–30, parents married vs parents divorced
Israel	Wolman (1951)	12–13, 13–14	BG	Variable	Feeling of love	Q [...]	12–19
Italy	Caletti (1980)	3, 4, 6, 7–12; childhood	BG	2,151	“Age of first same sex romantic sensations”	Q	Adults
Philippines	Upadhyay, Hindin & Gultiano (2006)	14–16, 17–19	BG	>2,000	“First crush [on opposite sex]”	Q	1998–2000 and 2002 samples

	Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Survey 2 (1994)	mean	BG		“first crush”	Q	15-24, urban vs rural
Russia	Schbankow (1922) reported by Weipenberg (1924)	<7,7-9, 10-15	G	324	Love feelings, love<14 [?]	Q	Students
Switzerland	Perrig-Chiello & Perren (2005a,b)	Mean, SD	BG	71+ 197	“First love”	I	<i>M</i> =47.2
U.S.	Bell (1902)	[3-14]	BG	>2, 200	Love, crushes	R, O	Adults, children
	Ellis (1948)	<12	G	69	First falling in love, # male subjects having been in love with before 12	I+Q	College students, 17-28 (<i>M</i> =20.5)
	Broderick & Fowler (1961)	5th...7th grade	BG	136 +128	Having a sweetheart y/n; reciprocity/publicity variables	Q	5th-7th graders
	Broderick (1965)	10-11; 12-13 and up	BG	1,262	Having been in love y/n	Q	Caucasians vs. “Negro” adolescents, 10-17

Broderick (1966)	10–11; 12–13	BG	946	Being in love	Q	[10–17]
Kephart (1967; 1973)	median	BG	1,079	“Firsts” on love affairs/ First infatuation, first love experience	Q	18–24
Broderick & Rowe (1968)	[10–12]	BG	479+506; 298+312	Having been in love y/n	Q	10–12
Broderick & Weaver (1968)	10–11; 12–13 and up	BG	<3, 551	Interpretation of images: pairs of romantic unit; var. romantic sub-themes	PI	10–17
Dixon (1984)	preadolescence	G	50	Crushes	I	32–60
Meyer-Bahlburg, Ehrhardt et al. (1985); Ehrhardt & Meyer-Bahlburg (1986)	–	G	32	First crush, love	SSI	Idiopathic sexual precocity vs. controls, 13–20
Gilmartin (1987)	Average timing (school grades) for	B	300+200	“strong, romantic interest in an	Q	Love-shy and non-shy men

		subsamples			age-mate of the opposite sex”		
	Hatfield et al. (1988)	[4–18]	BG	114+122	“Passionate love”	JLS	4–18
	Hatfield et al. (1989)	12–14+13–16	BG	24+17; 32+32	“Passionate love”	JLS	Young adolescents
	Smith et al. (1993)	Preschool	BG	77+66	Romances	TO	Teachers observing preschoolers
	Newman & Muzzonigro (1993)	Mean, SD	B	27	First same-sex crush	Q	Multicultural gay adolescents, 17–20
	Neemann et al. (1995)	[8–12]	BG	205	Romantic involvement	Q	8–12
	Pattatuci & Hamer (1995)	?	BG	358	Romantic / sexual attraction to male, female	I	Homo/hetero/bisexuals, 18–68, $M=31,4$
	Hill et al. (1997)	Childhood	BG	86+54	Love experiences	Q	Students, 18–43
	Montgomery & Sorell (1998)	Mode	BG	92+103; 94	First time fallen in love	Q	Adolescents grades 7–9, 12–16

				+96			(<i>M</i> =13.84); adolescents grades 10–12, 15–19 (<i>M</i> =16.35)
Adams et al. (2001)	12–14 and up	BG		/	Close-ness in romantic relationships	Q?	Early to late adolescents
Hearn et al. (2003); Kornreich et al. (2003)	Mean, range	G		180	Age at first crush, age at first in love/ having a boyfriend	SSI	12–14
Herten-Greaven (2003)	Mean/SD, median, mode, range	[both]		357	“I fell in love for the first time”	Q	11–19, <i>M</i> =14.37
Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2004)	Mean, SD: 15.8 (1.1)	[both]		155	First romantic relationship	I	Subjects followed from birth to age 19
Brown et al. (2004)	Mean	[both]		727	“First being in love”	SI	Comparison group from cohort study
Regan et al. (2004)	Mean	BG		683	“First falling in love”	Q	Multi-ethnic students (<i>M</i> =

							24.84)
	Montgomery (2005)	Early adolescents vs middle adolescents vs adults	BG	493	“In love now”, “times in love”, “juvenile passion”	JLS, other Qs	Students, 12–24

* Q=Questionnaire, PQ=Parental Questionnaire, I=Interview, GI=Group Interview, SI= Structured Interview, SSI=Semi-Structured Interview, PI=Picture Interpretation, DA= Drawing Assignment, O=Observation; TO=Teachers’ Observations; JLS= Juvenile Love Scale (Davis, Yarber, Bauserman, Schreer, & Davis, 1998, pp. 447-449).

In Table 2 available data on mean/median/modal age of “first occurrences” of “love” are collected, as reported in 14 studies.

Table 2

“First Love:” Mean, Median, and Modal Age

(in order of publication)

		Age of “First [in] Love”		
		mean (SD)	median	mode
Ellis (1948)	interview	12.19		
	questionnaire	11.65		
Kephart (1967: 471)	FF, “infatuation”		13.0	
	MM, “infatuation”		13.6	
	FF, “love experience”		17.1	
	MM, “love experience”		17.7	
Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell (1981: 274)		15.4 (2.8)		
Raboch (1986)		16 ^a		
Newman & Muzzonigro (1993)		12.7 (2.1)		
Nöstlinger & Wimmer-Puchinger (1994)		12.9		
Montgomery & Sorell (1998)				12
Jónsson et al. (2000)	“love affair”, parents	16.6 (2.5) ^b		
	married			
	“love affair”, parents	15.2 (2.0) ^b		
Silbereisen & Wiesner (2000)	divorced			
	West, 1991		14.86 ^c	
	East, 1991		14.60 ^c	
	West, 1996		14.77 ^c	
Haque (2002)	East, 1996		14.57 ^c	
	MM, Chinese	24		
Herten-Greaven (2003)	FF, Chinese	23		
	MM, Malay Chinese	21		
	FF, Malay Chinese	19		
		12.49 (2.93) ^d	13	12
Hearn et al. (2003)	“crush”	9.9		
	“love” ^e	10.9		
Brown et al. (2004)		17.66 ^g		
Regan et al. (2004)		17.47 ^f		
YAFS 2 (2004)	MM total	15.1		
	FF total	14.3		

Perrig-Chiello & Perren (2005)	MM	18.0 (3.8) ^h
	FF	18.4 (3.3) ^h

^a The value shown pertains to a control group.

^b $p < 0.05$.

^c Study uses survival analysis. Results not significant.

^d Based on sample of subjects who had experienced 10 selected "transitions."

^e In Komreich et al. (2003) this outcome is tied to a variable identified as "first boyfriend."

^f Boys: 17.33; Girls: 17.58 (not significant).

^g The value shown pertains to a control group. The values for abuse/neglect groups were on average a year less.

^h Not significant.

As anticipated, the variety of operational definitions does not allow an easy comparison. It can be inferred that "first love" in contemporary studies is construed as having occurred later when respondents are older (or rather, when born longer ago); samples of early teens suggest a preteen average, of teens an early to mid-teen average, and studies with early to midlife adults suggest a late teen or even early third decade average. A conclusion on the background and ethno-geographic specificity of this seems to warrant further inquiry. Three studies that offer male-female comparison do not suggest a large gender effect. There do not appear to be cross-continental studies offering numeric comparison of timing of pre-adult love/romance experiences. Only one study (Silbereisen & Wiesner, 2000) has examined trend effects; however the available data merely suggest there may be such effects both between and within post-industrial contexts.

Problems with Quantification

On the whole, then, the studies do not add up to an integrated image either from a psychological, cross-national, historical, or sociological perspective. The mentioned approaches and methods of love research, expectedly, fail to produce universal chronometric, biometric, sociometric, or anthropological principles. I submit this is so because most indigenous and subjective concepts that approximate "love" (attested as viewed as an abstract quality or principle in the *Oxford English Dictionary* from c1050) resist a clear-cut delimitation of their properties. Indeed, phenomenological essays such as by Alapack (1984) may, appropriately, conceptualize love as broad as "significant attachments." In Anglo-American developmental psychology one encounters love relationships among a multitude of alternative developmentalist concepts with their own specific histories, including attachment, bonding, chum friendships, passionate friendships, special friendships, intimate relationships, affectionate relationships, romantic involvement, romanticism, and crushes. Some of these seem culturally oxymoronic, for instance, passion and love are often regarded as different concepts. Desire and love, however, may well be "functionally independent phenomena with distinct neurobiological substrates" (Diamond, 2004, p. 117). What constitutes "love" in English-speaking children is ambiguous and problematic, terminologically and methodologically given: (a) its vernacular use to denote an indefinitely generalized fondness for experiences or objects, as well as (b) its status as a moral imperative informed by religious doctrines ("Love thy neighbor as thyself"), (c) historically consolidated conventions over types, natures, and expressions of love (e.g., Badinter, 1981) and desire (e.g., Gabb, 2001, 2004), as well as (d) traditionalized scientific debates

over dispositions considered near-universal, (un)natural or (dys)functional (“incest,” “overindulgence,” altruism, Oedipal complex, Laius complex). Cultural factors are at play in qualifications of instances of love, as indicated by “developmental stage,” behavioral competence, social viability, projected or motivational endurance, and object specific tenacity. Since discourses of love usually resist its substantiation or assessment while insisting on its idiosyncratic nature, the cultural *floruit* of love commonly resides where and when its denial or claim rhetorically is most effectively put, thus replicating historicizable exclusionary frameworks that may disqualify “children,” “nymphomaniacs,” “inverts,” “stalkers,” and “paraphiles” among others. A cross-national and historical comparative method, in any case, is problematic because of the wide variation of definitions politically, methodologically, “developmentally,” and emically attached to concepts akin to “love.”

Selected Qualitative Findings

Time as Result, Timing as Process

A combined qualitative-quantitative strategy would be able to take the caveats above into account. In many studies it is hard to ascertain from their findings what is measured other than subjects’ compliance with the idea of assigning the predicate of firstness to a series of affective or cognitive states. This basic question of ontology may have been answered through qualitative research that considers what constitutes love, and hence, what cultural substrate is being pinpointed in autobiographic time with narrations of first love. Hence we may learn what kind of process this pinpointing is (even if strictly an endurance of researcher intervention).

Other than retrospective studies, which often rely on reductive methods (questionnaires), qualitative approaches to preadolescent love within specified cultural settings have been based on interviews (e.g., Johansson, 1995; Redman, 2001), autobiographically inspired poetry (Wiley, 2001), writing assignments (Walton, Weatherall, & Jackson, 2002), unsolicited diaries, letters (Kernberg & Richards, 1994; Speyer, 1904), descriptive and comparative ethnography (e.g., Bozon & Heilborn, 1996; Merten, 1996), and cyberethnography. Although cross-cultural and comparative historical studies of “early” and “first” love are few, at the very least these studies provide a wider range of contexts through which temporizing can be observed as a process rather than a product. Existing studies do provide ample evidence for discursive, performative, and ethnolinguistic contingencies of love that remain entirely unaddressed in quantitative approaches, for instance where such approaches represent love within a sequential line-up of memorable events, thus as commensurable with other “firsts” in descriptive or analytic processing. From this processing we begin to learn about strategic deployment of love narratives in the often panicky and disruptive assemblage of youth identities in consumer settings.

Event, Experience, Experiment, Performance, Play

My argument has been that studies on first love hint at cultural patterns in autobiographical reconstructions of affective states as “love,” other than being simple

chronometry of a psychobiological property of (mainly Caucasian) brains, akin to other psychobiological properties. Furthermore, they may entrench the disambiguating notion of heterosocial love as an event rather than process or existential, ethnolinguistic, phenomenological, poetic, or discursive aspect of social interaction. As observed, the science of extrafamilial love, more specifically its chronometry, has been informed primarily by a sexological developmentalist motivation, and hence, a sexological developmentalist paradigm of interpretation. Lastly, sexological conceptions of eventual and propaedeutic love tend to exclude other than normative (heterosocial, peer) configurations of extrafamilial love proper.

Generally, propaedeusis refers to a first or introductory year in European universities, and abstractly to a candidate's entry into an age-graded system. A propaedeutic system is a regulatory, disciplinary structure with recruits, steers, and delivers individuals according to a protocol judged productive in terms of the contemporary ideological drive of the apparatus, commonly a ritualized trajectory of stepwise inaugurations. Propaedeusis thus has the connotation of scientia, of appropriate dissemination and trickling down of experience in terms of (strategic) timing, (appropriate) dosage, and (purposive) means.

Anthropological studies suggest that the social ontology of this "thing" called love may indeed be tied to ontogenetic ethnotheories and social management of it. For instance, in many societies the possible timing of love commitments has been based on control exerted through status change effected by initiation, betrothal, and marriage customs for either or both parties. In many societies marriage was scheduled around female pubescence, following betrothal in infancy or even before birth (Janssen, 2003, I). This situation is very interesting for answering the (historical) question under examination, although the issue of love was a peripheral concern to early anthropologists and continues to be very vulnerable to conjectural and ethnocentric writing.

As Erlich (1966) observed in Yugoslav villages, love songs are commonly sung "long before [children] have any personal interest in the other sex." The eligibility of assigning a propaedeutic or inaugural eventuality to "love" is conditional to the contingencies, demands, and cultural salience of life narratives, and as observed its chronology is often rendered commensurable with the chronology of other proposed "events" such as "first sex," affectively invested discursive categories like "childhood," and physiological trajectories such as "puberty" or "first ejaculation" (Janssen, 2007a). As sex, love in terms of an early performance of a subjective interest in exclusive dyadic extra-familial affiliation is often indigenously interpreted as deserving of disqualifications of a ludological ("play," "game"), agogical ("experimentation," "rehearsal"), or aestheticizing ("cute") nature. In English, zoosemy has been a prevalent manner of expressing this ("puppy-love," "calf-love"). Hence social ontologies of love and discourses of its chronology are mutually constitutive. I haste to add, however, that "play" is a ramification of love found to be native to children's peer groups worldwide. For instance, among Ojibwa children (as elsewhere), during the summer "the game of love is a tremendous important preoccupation, and is enriched with songs, music, tales of ascetic and faithful devotion, of suicides, and even visions." It is a game, but tremendously important.

In a range of publications, perhaps beginning with *Le "Amicizie" di Collegio: Ricerche sulle Prime Manifestazioni dell'Amore Sessuale* (Obici & Marchesini, 1898),

pre-adults in unisex environments are described to form dyadic pair bonds that mimic and/or mock adult heterosocial/sexual love affairs (e.g., Blacking, 1959, 1978; Gay, 1979; Hilhorst, 1989; Holycak, 1972; Mueller & Hopkins, 1979; Omari, 1963; Propper, 1982; Selling, 1931). Commonly this takes the form of pseudo-bigender, pseudo-kinship, age-asymmetric, or pseudo-age-asymmetric “special” friendships. These dyads are “pretence-making,” but also stable and exclusive over a long period of time, and thus problematize the notion of “real beginnings” of “true” love affairs. In Dutch boarding schools such friendships were discouraged, as were dyadic congregations per se (Perry, 1991, p. 131-144): “On est à deux, le diable est au milieu.” Diverse terms were used to describe the sexual element in the friendship; *klemen* (perhaps a Germanism of *claiming* with vague erotic implications), *kazen* (“a kind of beginning sexual offence”), and *kluppen* (from club, exclusive hanging out). In age disparate affiliations (with older comrades, teachers) the younger parties were given their own title (“poepie,” from F., *poupée*, doll; “hum,” which could be pronounced as a semi-cough). Because most qualitative studies only leave room for singular and heteronormative concepts of “true” love, these homosocial phenomena are likely to remain obscure.

Play Objects, Practice Objects, True Objects

Variably operationalized, in the West “romances” have been said to start at preschool age (Bell, 1902; Hatfield et al., 1988; Smith et al., 1993). Western peri-pubescent love typically allows the scenario of a predominantly unilateral “crush” (G., *Schwärmerei*) or teleiophilic stage (*teleios*, Gr. “adult”) in which nonparental authority figures or older, sexually mature personae such as iconic pop artists are preferred targets. Karniol (2001) provided support for the contention that “feminine” male media stars idolized by adolescent Israeli girls provide a “safe” target of romantic love in the period of time before girls start dating and become sexually active, and to practice “feeling norms” without the risk, pressure, and difficulties of reciprocity. Thus, early love can be normative and unilateral, inappropriately age-asymmetric if sexually expressed, entirely without a chance of any form of reciprocity or even acknowledgement. Studies that a priori define love as anchored by a person rather than a persona will simply ignore these forms of gradual and performative inauguration. There is a tendency in the English language to differentiate this from love proper. Another local variant of safe participation in love scripts is that of the courtship messenger, mediator, and “go-between” (Morrow, Sweat, & Morrow, 2004). Though not the object of love, the messenger usually knows more of the love message and the vicissitudes of solicitation than the eventual recipient or the outside world, and knows it earlier. Gradual and indirect forms of participation in love, if considered an interpersonal event, problematize a pinpointing in time of a first occasion.

Linguistics

An important part of the cultural analysis, then, is the ethnolinguistic study of love. Sex and romance are commonly conjoined in native and analytic vocabularies, for instance in the English expressions love-making and love-play. It is interesting to note that the use of the lexeme *love* here is commonly interpreted as an instance of

“euphemism.” Comparably, a circumcised Nandi boy may have intercourse with uninitiated girls, who form lasting couples called *mureret-sandet*, beloved-lover. This is paralleled among the Baraguyu and Maasai (where *dittos* or prepubescent girls associate with older *ilmurran* or circumcised warriors as “sweethearts”). Children among the urbanized Xhosa start having “sweethearts,” “boy-friends” or “girl-friends,” “cherries” (girls), or *iintokazi* (lit., female things) from 10 or 11 years onwards. Intensive petting—referred to as *unkuncokolisa* (to excite sexually), *uku-phathaphatha* (the intensive form of the verb *ukuphatha*, to touch or feel), or by the English word “romance,” used both as noun and verb— and with it sexual intercourse, are often part of a love-affair from an early age. Some have multiple simultaneous lovers; a major one (*makhonya*, known lover), and a “minor” one (*osecaleni*, “one on the side”).

Agency

Many ethnopsychological theories of love (and of erotic stamina) rely heavily on predestination, biology, metaphysical mediation, or supernatural intervention. Pubescents may utilize courtship-associated love magic as encountered in Africa, native North America, and outside these areas.² These are customs transmitted to or premeditated by one generation for the lower. Among the Zaire Baushi boys use “love cosmetics,” while Kgatla boys (Botswana) use “love medicines” (*meratsô*) just as aphrodisiacs may be used among Zaire Batetela and Mongo pubertal boys. Among the Luvale of Zambia, ceremonial preparations of girls include the administration of both aphrodisiac herbs and love potions.

Sometimes the occasioning of love is in fact staged by the senior generation, and hence the context socially recognized as requisite for its “taking place” may be an artifact of pedagogical intervention. The Bisaya (Borneo) practice informal “pairing” of eight- and nine-year-olds. Premarital chastity, however, was of great concern, and the timing of sexual initiation was determined by the mother-in-law associated with their future residence. Likewise, the Bakuria (Bantu, Kenya), who practice a form of preteen-preteen going-steady (Kisassi), are to observe a pre-circumcision taboo, as violation would sterilize the girl. In the harvest season, 1960s Shona adolescents would be allowed a one-month period of play marriage in self-made huts during their early teens (supposedly not including full intercourse) called *muhumbwe* or *mahungwe*.

Anthropologists have pointed out that “peer pressure” over love may work both as a prescription and as a proscription. Hunter (1960, p. 180-184) relates that a Bantu girl would be ridiculed if she did not have lovers (while being taught how to avoid defloration); the same was noted for the Basonge youngsters. A Thonga boy was socially required to court girls. “A boy who has no [...] flirt, no shigango, is laughed at as a coward; a girl who refuses to accept such advances is accused of being malformed.” In fact, “If a boy has not been successful in his “gangisa” [playing marriage in huts], if he is

² Pre-adult usage was reported as follows: In Africa: Zaire (Baushi, Batetela, Mongo), Zambia (Luvale), Botswana (Kgatla), Zimbabwe (Shona), Uganda (Acholi). In Americas: Round Lake Ojibwa. Love medicine was used by the Assiniboine, Cree, Blackfeet, and Yanoama (“young” men and women to aid them in their quest for mates). In Indonesia: Toradja. In New Guinea: Rungus Dusun [also anti-love magic] and Trobrianders.

despised by the girls and has no chance of being accepted,” a special rite is needed to help him find a wife. These findings seem to oppose the frequent Western finding that alleged romantic involvement in young children accounts for innuendo and ridicule, and may delay social use of love as a term or narrative.

Context and Cultural Script

The post-1940s American white middle-class “romance” script does not apply to many traditional love trajectories. Vilakazi (1962, pp. 46-52) details the social context of “calf-love” (*khipha udwa*) among Nyuswa Zulus, and its temporal and political relation to an assortment of bygone and still relevant customs such as *bekisa* (“by which a man who feels attracted to a young girl, but feels she is still too young to love, makes known his feelings towards her and asks her to wait for him until she is a little grown up”), *jutshwa* (“by which girls were declared big enough to take lovers and allocated to a particular *ibutho* ‘regiment’”), and *omula*, or girls’ “coming-out” ceremony. At age 14, in any case,

[A girl] is allowed to listen to and join in the conversation of older sisters on matters relating to love-making and behaviour with the boys and she learns all the techniques of managing suitors: lessons in quick repartee and *izifenqo*, or witticisms which are aimed at ridiculing young men and their words.

Around that time, P’Bitek (1964/1997) provides another engaging discussion of the love trajectories of Acholi (Uganda) youth consisting of boys “shooting” or selecting previously unacquainted girls who initially (as a rule, incessantly) declining proposals, the start of a “love debate” that may take months. Regardless of age, unmarried men and spinsters had no social status. After a ring token has been “given to” (won by) the male, he might introduce her to the bachelor’s hut, to which she may be pressured by her mother, to find out whether he is “alive.” “If for some reason boy cannot or does not sleep with girl, then boy is not sexually fit. [...] and that is the end of the affair between the two.” It should be added that pre-pregnancy congress was severely (physically, even lethally) punished. Context, then, determines in these cases what, if anything, may effectively and legitimately be called “love” or its inauguration proper.

Categories

With the worldwide erosion of patterns informed by generational authority, anthropologists see a shift to informal hierarchical typologies of being-acquainted that necessitate a reflection on which type is salient enough to articulate the notion of a true première. For instance, Abraham (2002) sketches how Indian metropolitan street youth negotiate between and within diverse categories of heterosocial affiliations, including *bhai-behen* (“a ‘brother-sister’ like relationship, platonic in nature and explicitly signifies a friendship devoid of any sexual involvement”), “true love” (“pursued with the implicit or explicit intention of marriage”), and “time pass friendships” (“a transitory relationship with a girl of their age, characterized by sexual intimacy that may lead to sexual

intercourse”). The notion of an introduction into love, here, is partial to boundary management, “sexual networking,” and to an instrumental, strategic typology of intimacy; at least love is subject to a plural, strategic, and political understanding which, in solely quantitative studies, will remain entirely obscure.

Discussion

Sexological ramifications delimit the study of love as productive of a scientific-normative discourse, but they also demarcate its substance. I have been arguing that the science of love has ramified it as a propaedeutic event, and hence, as scientifically accessible, commensurable, and comparable as a so-called “milestone.”

The phrase “sexual propaedeusis” was used in an important 1967 doctoral thesis by Flemish historian Jos van Ussel in reference of 16-18th century problematization of people’s entry into sexual life. This theme was central to a historical study of what he called the “western anti-sexual syndrome.” A popular edition of his two-volume dissertation (Van Ussel, 1968) proved highly influential in the Dutch 1970s call for “free love” for youth. As such, Van Ussel’s history of sexual propaedeusis fits in what Michel Foucault (1980, p. 104) addressed as the pedagogization of sex, the proliferation of subject positions identified as being pedagogically entitled or responsible in terms of their sexuality, and of pedagogical interventions as possible, beneficial, or necessary.

The discourse of virginity proposed that sex was a propaedeutic concept, binarizing subject positions as “before” or “after” what could qualify as its proper “initiation.” During the early 20th century the notion of initiation was tied to the emergent developmental category of the “adolescent,” which became perused by a Gestalt-like, revolutionary, subjectifying notion of “first times.” Illustratively, contemporary U.S. preteens, when asked by adult researchers, seem to prefer scheduling “the” first romantic relationship in the mid to late teens³ even though preteen infatuations are extremely common. In sexualibus, the notion of “my first time” today is so mainstreamed in popular youth culture and health research this hardly seems controversial, to the extent that is rarely criticized. Firstness is even imagined to be a key trope in “understanding” American adolescence (Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1995), or rather, “adolescence” is analytically construed as the biographical concurrence of the first material occurrences of everything that is held to be of critical importance to American personhood (including love, according to the authors). This representation could arguably present as appealing, since it allowed easier monitoring (compared to, for instance, freely fluctuating ever-present infantile sexuality, or free serum testosterone level, or access to the technology and visual representations of the kinds of sex that count as “real”) and greatly simplified the moment of normative intervention and reflection (“virginity pledges,” “abstinence”).

Thus, the premodern political salience of girls’ “defloration” has not diminished despite a contemporary youth culture that, while affirming and aestheticizing its legitimacy, paradoxically also prescribes deconstructive attitudes around notions of sex, beginnings, and development (Janssen, 2007b). It can even be observed that milestone and “debut” models of sex have considerably consolidated in their perceived

³ SmartGirl.com online national survey, Dec. 1999-Jan. 2000. Reported in *Girls speak out: Teens before their time. Executive summary* (Girl Scouts of the USA, New York): 13.

commonsensicality. During the later 20th century virginity became a “protective factor” as a result of survey work that associated age of first coitus to a full spectrum of conditions and proven risk factors: cervical neoplasia, human papillomavirus infection, HIV infection rates, non-use of contraceptives, multiple partners, poverty, violence, lack of parental supervision, and so on. Concurrently, sex was always a hot topic during the sociological ascent of the adolescent (e.g., Stich & Du Bois-Reymond, 1999).

Incidentally, the issue of timing has become absolutely crucial. Since age has replaced gender as a juridical-moral pivot during the 1970s, the politics over what sex is, is currently played out in a politics over what constitutes a “first time.” Firstness in American sexology and folklore, in binary terms of “wo/man-making,” propaedeutic events, has delivered a curious rope-pulling over eventuality and ontology; what is so sexy that it amounts to a première of the sexual (for quantitative approaches see Halpern-Felsher, Cornell, Kropp, & Tschann, 2005; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Remez, 2000; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Ontology and chronology are recursively implicated at the political level. Sex in Western legislation, paradoxically, is construed as an inclusive realm of involvement of or reference to bathing suit areas. The legitimacy of juridical intervention, moral outrage, and psychological concern all seem ultimately premised on a simple procedure of calculus ($[\text{age of consent} - [\text{current year} - \text{birth year}_1]] > 0 \approx [\text{birth year}_2 - \text{birth year}_1]$).

The biological undercurrent in much sexology of the “developmental” years also informs both a public and academic compartmentalization of issues according to what is considered their “appropriate” timing. In mainstream Western pedagogical culture, the idea of childhood is incompatible with the ideas of passion and desire as they are taken to be “puberty” related. However, puberty has been sensibly reconsidered as being only a part of the endocrinological staircase to heaven (e.g., McClintock & Herdt, 1996). Furthermore, biological premises occasion a restriction on seeing “sex,” or any of its imaginable origins or motives such as love, as an ethnolinguistic quagmire, a rhetorical device, a discursive entity, or an autobiographical necessity. A chronometric approach to “first love” would equally simplify its discourse-of-origin to an essentialist tale of “recognition,” namely of a surpassing of (unexplored) psychophysiological thresholds, an inaugural and inaugurating submission to impressions and inclinations.

To Summarize

This paper set out with the ambition to open up the phenomena of firstness and love for qualitative approaches. As qualitative approaches demonstrate, love’s ontological substance nor its temporal-sequential anchoring can be considered apart from the formal and informal ways it may be policed and negotiated. Although ethnographic research has frequently failed to address these issues, and although many qualitative studies have focused on other than temporal negotiations, above findings strongly suggest that love, as phenomenon-in-time, triggers reflection on what phenomena are. We can only project what love is. Whether or not it is a sensory event, we need to make sense of it with sensible tools.

Specifically, “first love” often seems a trajectory of appellation, social evaluation, and strategic maneuvering in which research may be no more than a tacit and highly reductive affirmation, or introduction, of frameworks. One narrative plot thus affirmed or

introduced, I have argued, is that of propaedeusis, which often seems to simplify a discourse-of-origin to a cryptobiological appreciation or “recognition” of ictal emergence rather than analyzing whether this is in some way partial to subjective perceptions. Ethnographic observations do provide relevant insights into the interdependency of ontological and ontogenetic narratives of love. Love tends to be tied up to social institutes through which it is formalized: Its firstness is accomplished through a range of disqualifications of what are considered its precursor stages. Love may “commence” as a role play script, however as a highly developed script, or through stable and exclusive (if temporary) “special” friendships, even with makeshift vocabularies to detail its characteristics, subjective and performative dry-runs of love can be completely unilateral and entirely unrealistic. Children may occupy positions in which they have a facilitative role in, but in certain respects superior insight into and knowledge of, the process of love negotiations. Early love has critically to do with negotiations over typologies of lovers and affairs, usually involving a hierarchical and functional differentiation. Lastly, the timing of love commitments may be delimited to parental interventions, peer pressure, idiosyncratic taboos, ritualized performance, even the use of magic.

It should be obvious that any analytic, subjective or indigenous, qualification of a “first occurrence” of love may be contingent on a complex interplay of these (selected) observations. This renders the comparative and interpretive use of numeric data decidedly limited for developmental theorists. This seems to be of interest since any pedagogical understanding of love, currently only abstractly articulated, will have to operate at the level of narration and dialogue, not at that of neurotransmitters.

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