Are We Confusing Passionate Love with Irrationality? Putting Passionate Love into a Cognitive-Behavioral Framework

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Abstract

Though passionate love has been scientifically investigated for about three decades, current definitions raise concerns about this concept as they cluster cognitions, emotions, and behaviors under the label of emotional state. This is in clear contradiction to the cognitive-behavioral framework. Therefore, the current study attempted to provide a cognitive-behavioral understanding of passionate love, arguing that the core feature of passionate love is an irrational way of thinking. We investigated the relationship between passionate love and irrationality, assuming a positive association between these concepts. Exploratory, we analyzed the relationship between irrationality and the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of passionate love. Also, we looked at the relationship between passionate love and rationality.

For the aims of this cross-sectional study, we recruited 139 volunteers who had been in love in the past or currently in love. They filled in the Passionate Love Scale and the short form of the General Attitude and Beliefs Scale. Results supported our hypothesis in that overall irrationality was positively associated to overall passionate love ($r (137) = .311$, $p < .001$), as well as with its cognitive ($r (137) = .355$, $p < .001$), emotional ($r (137) = .280$, $p < .001$), and behavioral components ($r (137) = .246$). Passionate love was not associated to rationality levels.

Based on the positive association to irrationality, a vulnerability factor to psychopathology and on the lack of an association to rationality, passionate love is most probably unhealthy. However, it remains to be seen in what respect it is unhealthy. One possibility is that passionate love could be a vul-

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nerability factor for subsequent general distress/romantic distress. Additional venues of research are discussed.

**Keywords**

Irrationality, passionate love, cognitive-behavioral framework

For the last three decades passionate love (Hatfield & Walster, 1978) or attraction (Fisher, 1998) has stirred the interest of neuroscientists, psychologists, and sociologists alike. Theoretically, passionate love is a transitional phase from lust to companionate love, while conceptually it is generally regarded as an emotional/motivational state of “longing for union with another” (Hatfield & Walster, 1978, p. 9; Fisher, 1998). In light of these general views, passionate love is better understood in contrast to companionate love, from which it is markedly distinct (for a review, Reis & Aron, 2008).

Emotionally speaking, while companionate love has been found to elicit feelings of calm, long-term attachment, and emotional constancy, passionate love was characterized by fast switches between positive and negative feelings (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996; Kim & Hatfield, 2004). Cognitively speaking, while companionate love allows for a normal allocation of cognitive resources to everyday activities, passionate love interferes with cognitive processes and reflects in repetitive and obsessive thoughts about the loved one (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987). These differences are neurally embedded, companionate love being associated to oxytocin and vasopressin and passionate love being associated to reward related neurotransmitters, such as dopamine (Insel, 2003; Hatfield & Rapson, 2009).

Most of the emotional, cognitive, and neural particularities of passionate love remind of psychopathology. For instance, passionate love is thought to share brain similarities to addiction. Namely, brain areas associated to reward and euphoria have an increased activity in passionately in love people when viewing the faces of significant others, but not when looking at the faces of friends or family (Bartels & Zeki, 2000). Therefore, scientific evidences seem to indicate that passionate love not only sets apart individuals smitten with love from those in other stages of love, but also brings them closer to endophenotypes of psychopathology, giving a new meaning to the expression “crazy in love”. In light of the complex cognitive, behavioral, chemical, and brain correlates of passionate love, we argue that it is reductionist to lim-