

# Towards a Sociological Understanding of Love: Insights from Research

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What is the object of a sociological or philosophical understanding of “love”? Should the aim of an inquiry on “love” be that of providing a general definition of “love”, or that of creating an approach which accommodates historicity, locality, and diversity of meaning-producing practices? This paper presents the epistemological premises and the operational steps of an original approach to love, the goal thereof is to understand personal and relational love experiences within the framework of historical change and cultural diversity, and to allow for rigorous empirical application. I discuss the theoretical foundations of this approach, that is the concept of “integrated semantics”, the latter’s empirical emergence from a pilot case-study, and its implementation in an ongoing research project focusing on the Canadian general population.

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A few years ago, I published a book chapter in which, while abiding by the usual conventions of academic writing, I expressed my deep frustration with most mainstream, popular philosophical approaches to “love” (Piazzesi 2017). [1] For heuristic purposes, and fully aware of the risk of oversimplifying complexity, I would argue that mainstream philosophical approaches to love proceed in two main ways: there is the *ipse dixit* track, followed by those who marshal the canon of philosophical reflection on love to provide definitions, ethical orientations, and authoritative underpinnings to their claims (e.g. “Plato says that erotic love is... does... has...”); and there is the *love is not what you think* track, taken by those who deploy their fine analytical skills to forge, for straightforward normative purposes, a universal definition of “love”, against which readers can test their commonsensical understanding of love, only to conclude that it was, regrettably, “inadequate”. At the time, my frustration was both existential and epistemological: eager to devote my intellectual efforts to the study of contemporary Western forms of love and intimacy, I was struggling with the conceptual and methodological toolbox that humanities and philosophy set at my disposal, while also refusing, personally, to dismiss my practical and existential understanding of “love” as incompetent and unworthy of scientific analysis (other than to be ditched, with a theatrical gesture, as flawed material).

[1] A revised Italian version of the book chapter can be found in Piazzesi (2019).

Back then, I only pleaded for a different approach to an inquiry into contemporary forms of love, one that would be able to validate individual experience by understanding personal and relational production of meaning, accommodate historical change and cultural diversity by focusing on locality and specificity, and allow for rigorous empirical application. My argument was that the focus of an inquiry on love should not be on finding a general, philosophically satisfactory, and normative definition of what love is and how it should unfold to be *real* love (instead of an experience that we mistake for love). Rather, we should concentrate our efforts on appraising and describing cultural and historical variation in the experience of love, which, by foregrounding continuity across local discontinuities (Morikawa 2014; West 2011), would not prevent a more general understanding of love as a universal experience. I argued that the history of Western love can be regarded as that of an emotional-based pattern of meaning production for human life, which was shaped and developed through two main processes: firstly, an uninterrupted hermeneutical attention for emotional experience, for its meaning in life, and for the conditions of possibility of a totalizing intimacy with the other and his or her “otherness”; secondly, the inscription of such experience and discursive exercise into situated institutions and social practices (from medieval *cours d’amour* to modern polyamory, from libertinage to bourgeois marriage), which are in turn intertwined with dynamics of social inequality, distinction, and gender relations. Hence, it can be argued that culturally situated discursivity, and its intrinsic variation across time and contexts, is a central feature of the (Western) experience of love: the latter is shaped by our reflective disposition towards the *modi* of socializing emotional experience (intimacy, attachment, bonds, gender roles and identities, institutions, communication, interactional patterns, cultural productions). In our ordinary, everyday lives, we *do* love, like we *do* gender (West &

Zimmerman 1987; Simon & Gagnon 1973; 2003), through communicating, thinking, writing, fantasizing about it, consuming and appropriating cultural productions that represent it, including those created by more or less ancient philosophers. An inquiry on love, this was my main claim, should allow a space for this complexity, without reducing love to a specific cultural program, to an abstract universal, or to a subjective experience.

This was my starting point years ago. In this essay, which is more than a research note, I wish to present what happened after: how this first intuition was translated into a research program on contemporary Western forms of love in two main stages, the first completed and the second still in progress; how my research team and I began by crafting a theoretical framework for the planned inquiry and tested it through a case study; and how the resulting analyses and theoretical insights are currently implemented within a large research project on love ideals and practices among Canadians.

### State of the Art

There is a general consensus in scholarly literature which acknowledges that love relationships have undergone important transformations in recent decades. New relationship forms have emerged, shifting the traditional merge of love, sexuality, conjugality, and domesticity. New intimate ‘biographies’ have become common, and serial monogamy is the new norm, with individuals experiencing multiple committed relationship in their life course. Demands for equality and minority rights have changed conjugal institutions and parenthood. Digital tools for partner search have been created.

Media and scholarship have framed these transformations mostly through a pessimistic lens, cyclically prophesying the “end” of love (Hillenkamp 2009; Illouz 2019). Sociology of intimate relationships has attempted to grasp the changes for the last three decades (Musiał 2013), but available literature is often flawed by a lack of empirical basis or weak theoretical frameworks to interpret data. We still do not know how people’s ideas and values regarding love and intimate relationships have changed in the last decades (e.g. regarding commitment, monogamy, sexual and affective exclusivity, personal autonomy, gender roles). Filling this knowledge gap would be crucial for scholarship, but also for counselling, general awareness, and policymaking. Love bonds are indeed key to individual and collective well-being in society: in addition to bestowing meaning on human life (Silver et al. 2021) and providing room for self-expression and growth, the quality of intimate relationships is also a good predictor of life expectancy (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010), better health (Yang et al. 2016), and happiness in later life (Waldinger et al. 2014).

According to scholarly literature in social sciences, the main recent transformations in intimate relationships consist in a general “de-traditionalization” (Gross 2005), or the increasing distance of ideas and practices of intimacy from normative conceptions of love, sexuality, and conjugal life (Giddens 1992). Different, “modern” forms of intimate relationships, rejecting features of long-term monogamous marriage, have become more visible, more popular, and are widely featured in the media in Western countries: consensual non monogamies (e.g. open relationships,

multi-partner relationships, and polyamory), which question a love ideal based on affective and sexual exclusivity (Van Hooff 2017); “living apart together” (non-cohabitant long-term relationships), which dismiss the traditional definition of loving couple or family as sharing a home (Carter et al. 2016; Duncan 2014; 2015); casual sexual relationships not meant to lead to coupling, thus rejecting the subordination of sexuality to love and long-term commitment (Rodrigue et al. 2015, 2018; Giraud 2017). The temporality of intimate relationships, traditionally oriented towards long-term monogamy, has also changed. People’s intimate paths are widely characterized by “serial monogamy” (Jackson & Scott 2004; Andersson 2015) and repeated partner search, which is increasingly supported by online dating services (Bergström 2019), and periods of singlehood, which in turn becomes something of a lifestyle (Kislev 2019). Beyond its sociological relevance, this trend has an impact on family policy, law, and social services, due to the increasing variety of “blended families” (Kumar 2017; Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk 2015). The politics of intimacy is changing, too. While love was traditionally anchored in gender complementarity (Jackson 1993), detraditionalization entailed institutional recognition for same-sex relationships and LGBT families (Kollmann 2013); and, thanks to feminist movements, a broader rejection of gendered division of household, care, and emotion work in intimate relationships (Boulet & Le Bourdais 2017; Duncombe & Marsden 1993).

For more than three decades, sociologists have described these changes through the conceptual dichotomy between a traditional, or romantic love ideal, and a modern love ideal, or partnership (Luhmann 1982; Leupold 1983): people’s ideas and practices would be organized along this divide. Some scholars see detraditionalization as emancipation, with individuals and couples building their own normative references through communication, problem-solving, and ongoing negotiation (Giddens 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; 2001). Contrary to the romantic couple, the “pure relationship” (Giddens 1992) would be democratic and free from power inequalities (especially with regard to gender). Other scholars read the trend towards detraditionalization as a form of “colonization” (Musiał 2013), where the intimate sphere would be contaminated by neoliberal, capitalist, and individualistic values, leading to a fragilization (Baumann 2003; Bawin-Legros 2004; Chaumier 2004; 1999) or a commercialization (Illouz 1997; 2012) of bonds. Such trends would be accelerated by online dating (Kaufmann 2010; Lardellier 2012). A third group of authors (Van Hooff 2013) has criticized the first two for a general lack of empirical basis for their claims. Empirical work shows that people’s values and practices in the intimate sphere are partially detraditionalized, while partially clinging to traditional norms (Budgeon 2008; Coontz 2016; Henchoz 2014; Van Hoof 2013; 2017). Traditional, romantic values may have lost some normative power, but they still provide meaning (Gross 2005), as current love narratives in mainstream media also show (Morin 2012; Reinhardt-Becker 2015). In contemporary Western societies, romantic love ideal and partnership ideal coexist for traditional couples (Swidler 2001) as well as for partners in highly “modern” relationship forms, such as “living apart together” (Duncan 2015). For Green and colleagues (2016), sexual orientation is a crucial variable, with heterosexual couples being more attached to traditional values (e.g. monogamy). Despite wider acceptance of non-committed

sexual relationships (Giraud 2017), monogamy is still regarded as the proper framework for sex (van Hooff 2017; Piazzesi et al. 2020). Empirical work also shows that the “gendered revolution” has not yet occurred: traditional inequalities still organize intimate relationships, with women performing the majority not only of housework and care work (Van Hooff 2013; Boulet & Le Bourdais 2017), but also relationship or “emotion” work (Duncombe & Marsden 1993; Jamieson 1999; Jonas 2007). As to the alleged neoliberal turn in contemporary intimacy, there is no empirical evidence of a weakened interest in committed intimate bonds (Cherlin 2009), and online dating does not entail a commodification of partners, love or sexuality (Bergström 2019).

Scholarship describes the dynamic between traditional (romantic) and non-traditional (partnership) normative references in current Western intimacies as a tension (Knapp & Wurm 2019), a conflict (Cherlin 2009), a synthesis (Gabb & Fink 2015), a coexistence (Swidler 2001), a nuanced continuity (Van Hooff 2013) or a “bricolage” (Carter & Duncan 2018). This descriptive stance, while it documents the coexistence of two love cultures, does not adequately account for it in a sociological perspective. Firstly, it does not clarify how heterogeneous elements (e.g. the idea of intimacy as romantic merge *and* the idea of intimacy as fostering individual autonomy) combine in consistent logics and praxis of intimacy. Secondly, it does not provide a sociological interpretation of the correlation between such a hybrid love ideal and current social transformations. With my research team, I worked since 2016 to fill this gap by providing and empirically testing an innovative theoretical framework for the study of intimate relationships as sets of ideas and practices in contemporary Western societies. [2]

### Assembling the Theoretical Toolbox

Consistent with the critique of mainstream approaches to love and love relationships that I detailed above, we needed a theoretical toolbox which would enable an appraisal of diversity, continuity, and historical change in love practices. To assemble this toolbox, we availed ourselves of Luhmann’s idea of “love semantics” (1993; 1982), a coherent repertoire of symbols, meanings, narratives defining the places, times, identities, roles, feelings, and behaviours related to “love” and “intimacy”. This repertoire is historically constituted, thus subject to transformations correlated to emerging social problems and their translation into “relational” problems in matters of love. Semantics is socially available, “known” by people through stories, maxims, metaphors, and cultural goods carrying and reinterpreting them. Mass diffusion of media (literature, movies, songs, TV-shows, social media etc.) increases the chances for individuals and groups to be exposed to love semantics, the latter being a prosperous field of cultural production. Whereas available literature still works with the dichotomy of “romantic love semantics” versus “partnership semantics”, our major theoretical contribution was the model of *integrated semantics*, where current love narratives and ideals meaningfully combine elements stemming from romantic love and partnership ideal. We claimed that *integrated semantics*

[2] I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support (*Insight Development* grant 2016-2018; *Insight* grant 2021-2016), which allowed me and my team to carry out the different stages of this research program. I am also indebted to my co-investigators (Martin Blais, Julie Lavigne, Hélène Belleau, Sophie Bergeron, Barbara Thériault) and to our graduate research assistants at Université du Québec à Montréal (Catherine Lavoie Mongrain, Roxane Renière, Cynthia Eysseric, Jade St-Pierre-Cécire, Noé Klein).



arises from social reflexivity regarding problems generated by romantic love and partnership semantics, and, as for all other love semantics (Luhmann 1982), responds both to social problems in the sphere of intimacy and to the inability of alternative semantic paradigms to treat them.

Drawing on Simmel (1908) and Luhmann (1982), we defined intimacy as the sphere where individual personality is relevant as a whole and where interactions take place, the motivation and the interpretation thereof are based on partners' individuality and on the unique character of their relationship. Themes, narratives, norms, and ideas about intimacy are drawn from a socially available semantic reservoir, helping social actors differentiate and make sense of intimate interactions. Historical and social change continually reconfigure existing semantic patterns into new responses to emerging problems of definition and maintenance of intimate relationships (Luhmann 1993). Hence, describing current love semantics does not consist in isolating the "new" from the old", rather in understanding the logics of their intertwining and how the single semantic elements are organized around it. Tradition and modernity must be regarded as combined within and through people's ideas and actions (Cherlin 2009; Smart & Shipman 2004). The "integrated semantics" model (Piazzesi et al. 2020) provides a theoretical framework to describe and document continuity, change, and the synergy between the two in current diverse ideals and practices of intimacy. Integrated semantics allows to grasp different attitudes and profiles regarding the intimate sphere by moving beyond the available threefold model according to which people's ideas can be traditional, modern, or "mixed". *Integration* means that heterogeneous semantic elements merge to generate meaning; that such semantic elements, albeit historically opposed, do not appear as contradictory to those combining them; and that the integrated semantics offers solutions to problems of the intimate sphere which could not be handled through either previously available semantics. As we will see, a romantic idealization of passionate love can be integrated to a post-traditional, skeptical stance regarding love's unfolding and its consequences (Reinhardt-Becker 2015; Piazzesi et al. 2018b), thus warming up the "cold" intimacy encouraged by the partnership ideal (Carter & Arocha 2020). The stronger relational dimension of detraditionalized intimate bonds (Kirkby 2008) can be fostered through an integration of passionate, romantic commitment and "therapeutic" work on the relationship, sustained by a partnership ideal (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1999; Swidler 2001). In addition, if semantic references help individuals and relationships treat specific problems, we can expect to find a correlation between statuses, challenges, experiences of individuals, and endorsed (or deployed) semantic references (Kellerhals et al. 2004).

### What Is Integrated in Current Semantic Repertoires?

As previously sketched, scholarship on contemporary love paradigms distinguishes two main competing semantics: romantic love and partnership. Romantic love semantics, which spreads in Europe and North-America since the end of the Eighteenth century, characterizes love as an overwhelming passion (Jackson 1993) directed toward an individual (Leupold 1983). Such attitude entails a merger of individualities (Friedman 1998),

resulting in an exclusive, long-term relationship which conflates feelings, sexuality and conjugality (Lenz 2005; 2006) – traditionally, marriage – and exceeds in importance every other project or relationship of the partners (Tyrell 1987). Since romantic love provides the greatest happiness in human existence, a life deprived of this kind of love is barely worth living, thus the desire for it is seen as universal (Hahn 2008). Historically, romantic love semantics is associated with an individualization process (Luhmann 1982) revolving around autonomy, validation of the self through intimacy in opposition to the increasing anonymity of the outer world (Reinhardt-Becker 2015), and freedom. Hence, romantic love is at the center of major social transformations regarding the constitution of individuality (Giddens 1992), the formation and maintenance of marital and family bonds, and gender relations within heterosexual relationships. Starting in the early 19th century, love marriage (based on two equally free lovers' uninfluenced choice) competes with strategic marriage (based on concerns linked to families' economic, social, and symbolic reproduction), and love gradually becomes the only legitimate ground for entering marriage in Western societies. It has been argued that the institution of divorce can be regarded as the logical consequence of a marriage based on an ephemeral mutual disposition such as (romantic) love (Ciabattari 2016).

Partnership love semantics, on the other hand, revolves around a rational, practical, realistic conception of love (Reinhardt-Becker 2015), not necessarily sexually exclusive, resulting in a relationship based on negotiation, problem solving, and relationship work (Lenz 2005; 2006). In such relationship, individuals preserve their autonomy and personal space (Leupold 1983), and the bond only lasts as long as the partners consider it to be satisfying and supportive of their self-fulfilment (Giddens 1992). Inheriting the legacy of early Twentieth century “sachliche Liebe” (Reinhardt-Becker 2020), partnership semantics unfolds and is democratized around the 1970s. It is considered as a point-by-point response to the empirical, and political problems engendered by the romantic love paradigm (Leupold 1983). It relinquishes notably the idea of *amour fou*, now considered too unstable and ephemeral to provide solid grounding to individual self-fulfilment; substitutes romantic merge with the preservation of sufficient individual autonomy within the relationship; rejects intimacy as non-mediated and predestined, and anchors it instead to relationship work, communication and self-disclosure; tolerates and even encourages individual interests and commitments aside from the relationship, to the point of weakening the traditional centrality of sexual exclusivity. Indeed, sexuality is regarded as an autonomous source of individual pleasure, hinged on self-expression and individual needs, and potentially disconnected from love feelings. Most notably, whereas romantic love upholds a model of gender relations that can be defined as “equality in difference”, partnership semantics promotes a pattern of gender “indifference” in the attribution of rights, obligations, roles, and tasks.

While romantic love semantics and partnership semantics are usually regarded as opposed (Leupold 1983; Reinhardt-Becker 2015), yet coexisting in contemporary representations, discourses, and practices (Bozon 2016; Duncan 2015; Gross 2005; Swidler 2001; Van Hoof 2013), our theoretical model posits that their coexistence evolved into an *integration*, which results in a new love and intimacy semantics combining traditional

references with modern reflexivity (Piazzesi et al. 2018a; 2018b; Carter & Duncan 2018).

Before proceeding to a more detailed description of *integrated semantics*, it is worth noting that gender relations are an important analytical and empirical axis with regard to traditional semantic repertoires and to integrated semantics. Available literature shows how both the romantic and the partnership semantics historically had and still have a specific gender-related impact on meaning-production in intimate practices. Romantic love semantics historically translated into the bourgeois marriage, organized by the ideology of the separate spheres. Accordingly, since the 19th century advice literature identified women as responsible not only for domestic and childcare work, but also for intimate relationship work more generally: fostering conjugal intimacy, ensuring harmony and well-being in the family, avoiding marital conflicts etc. (Mahlmann 1991). Despite the shift toward partnership semantics, and its model of gender interchangeability, the tendency towards a gendered division of spheres in intimacy is confirmed by recent studies on contemporary self-help books: with the addition of a neoliberal, managerial twist (Jonas 2007), which is fostered by the therapeutic turn of the partnership semantics (Giddens 1992), self-help books on couple relationships still encourage women to “manage” the couple, perform communicational and emotional work, embrace selflessness etc. It goes without saying that empirical research shows persisting inequalities in the way domestic work, care work and emotional work are divided within heterosexual love relationships, with women statistically taking on the bigger share (Duncombe & Marsden 1993; Gabb & Fink 2015; Goldberg 2013). It is on this terrain that feminist scholars have criticized the persisting romantic allure of contemporary love ideals for being delusional, unrealistic or misleading, particularly for women (Jackson 1993; Evans 2003, 2004; Illouz 2012). In her analysis of relationship advice books published between 1981 and 2000 and directed to a female readership, Hazleden (2004) has found evidence of this same pessimistic, even pathologizing stance towards love. We consider this to be a key element in explaining why, in contemporary cultural productions, questions related to gendered imbalance are central to semantic elaboration, as we will see below.

### An Overview of Integrated Semantics

The first stage of our research program aimed at testing the idea, found in literature, of the coexistence of romantic love and partnership semantics. Due to the crucial relationship between semantic elaboration and mainstream cultural production, we regarded current TV-shows as the best material for a case study. Aware of the importance of gendered themes in contemporary love semantics, we selected a very popular “female-centered drama” (Lotz 2006) from Quebec. [3] Our results clearly showed that semantic references coming from opposite paradigms were not only juxtaposed within narratives of love and intimacy, rather combined to let new meanings emerge. Rather than resulting in logical and practical *impasses*, their polarization was used to move beyond a meaning-production opposing modernity and tradition and toward a reflexive, critical

[3] For a description of the pilot case study, see Piazzesi et al. (2018a and 2018b).



yet pragmatic stance. Hence, our inductive analysis and theorization highlighted the insufficiency of theories of semantic coexistence and the need for an original theoretical framework to appraise love paradigms in contemporary Western narratives.

With regard to love and its status in individual life (Table 1), “integrated semantics” combines ancient elements with a critical stance towards them. In current Western love narratives, for instance, love is still defined as an uncontrollable passion, that justifies irrational, erratic, dramatic behaviours. However, the realization that passionate love fades in time is now part of love narratives, and traditional marriage/coupling, with its persistent gendered inequalities, is seen as the main culprit. Such skepticism toward the romantic ideal of love as inexhaustible mutual interest contains an interesting twist: the solution to this problem is not exclusively found in a “colder”, more rational and entrepreneurial form of intimacy based on communication and problem-solving (as the partnership ideal prescribes), rather in an ongoing work to “relight the fire” of passion within the relationship.

Romantic love semantics	Partnership semantics	Integrated semantics
Love is passion and cannot be controlled.	Love is rational, stable, and conditional on the partners' satisfaction.	Love is passion, which marriage (conjugal) extinguishes through routine and gender inequalities.
Passionate love is self-loss, similar to madness.	“Amour fou” as unacceptable risk. Self-protection and caution are to be prioritized.	Pessimism with regard to love, but persisting idealization of the latter. Desire to “fall” in love combines with attempt to protect oneself.
Love is the source of the greatest happiness in human life.	Love must support the partners' self-realization. Love is one priority among others.	Love's idealization as a source of perfect happiness combined with skepticism with regards to the possibility of such perfection.

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[Tab. 1] Integrated semantics related to love feelings.

Let us move to conjugality (Table 2), that is the material and communicational organization of mutual expectations and interactions in a relationship that projects itself in the future. In this respect, integrated semantics presents a series of themes that clearly testify to the impact of feminist critiques of heterosexual relationships as a source of self-loss, material oppression, and self-restriction in women's lives. If monogamous long-term conjugality (i.e. “the couple”) is still depicted as the ideal form of intimacy, its idealization is explicitly counterpointed by the thematization of the sacrifices, compromises, and renunciations that women must undergo within it. Mistrust engenders distance, but the latter translates into a search for other significant intimate relationships (friendship above all) rather than in pure skepticism with regard to fusional intimacy, which is still idealized. Instead of a rejection, we observed the search for “balance”, which can stretch to the point of causing an implicit or explicit renegotiation of the otherwise still nurtured ideal of monogamy and exclusivity. Last but not least, forms of oppression based on gender are semantically treated through a combination of pessimism and realism. In current love narratives, gender inequalities are explicitly brought up as unfair and deleterious for women, while the latter still partially endorse gendered

domestic and intimate arrangements and, more importantly, the idea that men and women experience love, sex, and intimacy differently.

Romantic love semantics	Partnership semantics	Integrated semantics
Conjugal project is prioritized over personal project.	Personal project prioritized over conjugal project, or at least competing with it.	Conjugal project as ideal life arrangement. Love as sacrifice (for women). Distrust due to past experiences. Tension between conjugal and personal project is gendered.
Conjugal intimacy, merge, sharing all aspects of life.	Personal intimacy; resistance against romantic merge and sharing all aspects of life.	Desire for conjugal intimacy and quest for other kinds of intimacy as balance.
Norms derive from the relationship form: love relationships are monogamous and stable.	Norms are negotiated case by case within the relationship; partners are equal. Norms can evolve.	Traditional norms still are strong (e.g. monogamy). Traditional norms are indirectly and strategically questioned and challenged.
Partners are equal, but gender difference is nonetheless preserved to organize conjugal life and make sense of it.	Partners are equal. Gender difference is "indifferent".	Persisting inequalities between men and women. Women experience them with frustration. Women endorse gendered discourses and arrangements.

[Tab. 2] Integrated semantics related to conjugality.

Lastly, traditional and modern themes are combined in current semantic elaboration of sexuality (Table 3). If conjugality, or "the couple", is still regarded as ideal framework for sexuality, individual needs and desires are more openly shared and gain acceptance even though they threaten to weaken the framework of exclusivity. Narratives of sexual agreement and negotiation in the couple increasingly thematize the quest for solutions to this tension, also based on the above mentioned realization that conjugal life is likely to become the tomb of passion. While representations of non-monogamic experiences still characterize the latter as cheating, failure, weakness - more often than not attributed to men -, consensual non-monogamy is increasingly regarded as possible (e.g. in polyamory and open relationships) and even necessary depending on the relationship history and on the biography of the partners. Traditional sexual scripts based on gender difference are gradually shifted towards greater acceptance for women's sexual agency, but the latter is often represented in rather traditional terms, as the power to resist and delay sex.

Romantic love semantics	Partnership semantics	Integrated semantics
Sexuality strengthens the conjugal bond. Couple as legitimate framework for sexual intercourse.	Sexuality as individual satisfaction and pleasure. Conjugal life and its routine thwart passion.	Conjugal life as privileged framework for sexuality, as long as it does not entail giving up individual needs and desires. Search for solutions to this paradox.
Sexuality is organized through monogamy. Extramarital relationships are « cheating ».	Sexual exclusivity is gradually rejected. New possible relationship forms are available (open relationships, polyamory and so on)	Monogamy is still the ideal, but extramarital relationships are excusable. Alternative relationship forms are considered and explored.
Sexual scripts are gendered. Women are passive, men are active and take initiative. Women must have "virtue", men must overcome the resistance.	Sexual scripts promote equality. Women are encouraged to express their sexual desire.	Traditional sexual scripts are gradually revised. Women's sexual agency is promoted, but is often tantamount to resistance and delaying sex.

[Tab. 3] Integrated semantics related to sexuality.

In sum, our content analysis of current mainstream representations of intimacy in North American TV-Shows enabled us to move beyond the dichotomy of romantic love and partnership semantics, which, either taken separately or in simple opposition to each other, cannot properly describe current love narratives. Integrated semantics successfully describes the synergy between traditional and modern elements, and can account for the historical reflexive process that engendered such synergy as well as for the contextual occurrences of integrated meaning-production. In the analyzed narratives, individuals are presented as availing themselves of combined semantic references to make sense of and justify their different commitments, actions, decisions, relationships. Integrated semantics elaborates social reflexivity triggered by feminist movements with regard to heterosexual conjugal arrangements, such as romantic love, marriage, and sexual exclusivity, but it combines it with generalized discontent with solutions proposed by the partnership paradigm. Despite their progressive, egalitarian, and futuristic allure, those solutions are still problematized as unrealistic, such as in the case of a couple beyond gender in societies where gendered inequalities in the domestic realm are still the norm; as unsatisfactory, such as in the case of a love beyond passion; as undesirable, such as in the case of an individualistic withdrawal from intimacy and commitment; or as unpractical, such as in the case of intimacy beyond monogamy. Hence, an integrated semantics encompasses the critical stance towards traditional references, the dissatisfaction with modern solutions to the problems of intimacy, and the ongoing, practical, negotiating quest for new solutions in matters of love, conjugality, sexuality, and domesticity.

However, our conclusions are based on representations, fictional narratives, and commercial productions. There still is no comprehensive data allowing us to extend our conclusions to the general population's ideas and practices. Even if qualitative data highlights cultural change, it is impossible to assess the extent to which a semantic shift has occurred in the individual intimate life in the general population (Van Hoof 2013). This is where the second stage of the research program begins.

### Future Developments and Concluding Remarks

In the second stage of the research program presented in this paper, my team and I will map levels and modes of integration of semantic references in current attitudes towards different conceptions of intimacy in the Canadian adult population. The project, *Mapping Contemporary Love and Intimacy Ideals in Canada*, received funding for five years and is currently in the first phase of data collection through an online survey administered to a large sample of Canadian adults (first semester of 2022). In conceiving the research, we posited that our modelling of current semantics can be applied to the study of individual attitudes towards intimacy in the general population. The flexibility of the model is an important advantage, as it describes modes of integration but does not presume of the content of such integration. While we can expect to find the same integrated semantic elements documented in cultural productions, we can also expect more diversity linked to the variety of socio-demographic

profiles, genders, sexual orientations, social statuses, socio-political challenges, and experiences of individuals and relationships. Like Scarborough and Risman (2019) in their study of gender attitudes, we consider intimacy as multidimensional, i.e. consisting of four theoretically distinct and practically interconnected dimensions of experience and reflexivity (love feelings, sexuality, conjugality, domesticity). The advantage of preserving multidimensionality is twofold. Firstly, we can document dissonance between people's attitudes regarding the four dimensions: e.g., modern egalitarian ideas about gender roles in conjugal relationships can coexist with traditional expectations regarding gender roles in initiating sexuality (Piazzesi et al. 2020) or during courtship (Lamont 2020). Secondly, the merge of the four dimensions is a recent socio-cultural transformation, fostered by the romantic paradigm (19th and 20th century). Recent de-traditionalizing trends entail a return to increasing separation between previously merged dimensions: sexuality can be disconnected from love (Giddens 1992; Guy 2020) and conjugal commitment (Rodrigue et al. 2015); conjugality can be disconnected from domesticity, as in "living apart together" arrangements (Carter et al. 2016), and so forth. Our theoretical framework allows to identify modes and degrees of connection and separation between these dimensions; and treats such modes and degrees as indicators of the affinity with a specific semantic pattern. In order to achieve breadth in our mapping of individual attitudes and depth in our understanding of data, we are implementing a mixed methods explanatory sequential research design (Creswell & Creswell 2018), where methods are combined to increase comprehensiveness and confidence in findings. A quantitative survey, aimed at identifying emerging profiles, will be followed by complementary qualitative fieldwork for expansion and development of insights (O'Cathain et al. 2007) on modes of integration between semantic references. This research design will enable us to meet our three main objectives: document individual understandings of love, contextualize them through an ensemble of socio-demographic and cultural variables to evaluate their specific sociological correlates, and appraising their role in people's practices, decisions, and intimate careers.

As I hope that this paper successfully explains, the research program that my team and I undertook six years ago is rooted in a specific epistemological posture. Such posture regards loving attachment as a likely general, transcultural, transhistorical human disposition, which, however, can become the object of scientific knowledge only as far as it observed through its specific, local, historical, diverse forms. In other terms, what is continuous and general can be only observed through the discontinuities and peculiarities engendered by its uninterrupted morphogenesis. Historical and local semantic elaboration constitutes the clockwork of ongoing change, which engenders a multiplicity of patterned individual intimate "careers" situated in sociocultural contexts that shape them and are shaped by them. The patterned aspect of such careers can be modeled by reintroducing historicity – which means continuity and change – in the examination of how individuals and relationships combine references and ideals to make sense of situated desires, feelings, interactions, experiences, conventions, and institutions. In this framework, I plea for a sociological approach to love practices that treats individuals as competent social actors, who know what they are talking about when they talk about

love. Through this meaning-producing work, in which the self, the other, and the world are interwoven (Plummer 1995), people integrate their love relationships with the complexity of individual lives and social networks. As social environments are defined by relations of inequality and power, individual meanings, behaviours, and identities are continuously contested and must be negotiated against collective political and material constraints. “Love” is neither a private nor a strictly spiritual or ethical matter: it is a complex set of ideas, values, feelings, behaviours, resources, institutions, traditions, reflexivities, stories that inhabit our “selves” and our social spaces, providing a framework for individual and collective experiences.



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