

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## "Hooray for Love!" \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

In an August 1993 article of mine, I said, "*Love as a basis for marriage is a relatively recent invention in our society – no more than 200 years old.*" This is because Western social historians – who I relied on for my information – supported this conclusion. However, recent anthropological evidence contradicts it.

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***"For decades, anthropologists and other scholars have assumed romantic love was unique to the modern West."***

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When anthropologists came across romantic love in their fieldwork with other cultures, they largely overlooked it. Even if they had given the topic systematic attention, it was very difficult to distinguish between romantic love and lust.

It was thought that romantic love could only blossom with higher economic standards, which allowed more leisure time. However, this is contradicted by cross-cultural studies of Dr. Edward Fischer, an anthropologist at Tulane University. In surveying the writings and oral tales of 166 cultures, Fischer found clear evidence of romantic love in 89% of them. The remaining 19 cultures might have had love, but convincing evidence has not been found yet.

The new evidence comes from old cultural folktales. These stories are about lovers or obtaining advice or potions to make someone fall in love. Many of them are tales of warning – cautioning youngsters not to fall in love. Like the tale of Romeo and Juliet, they typically involve a young man falling in love with a woman who is promised to someone else. The woman returns his love, the couple elopes, but they end up tragically.

This new view sees romantic love as universal with humans, as indicated by Dr. Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History.

*"The brain chemistry for romantic love evolved along with pair bonding four or five million years ago, when our species started to forage, stand on two legs and carry food back to a safe place to eat. Mothers could not do all that and carry an infant in their arms without help from a partner. That led to a major change in reproductive strategy – infatuation and attachment, the ingredients of romantic love."*

Even with an evolutionary development of romantic love, many cultures have restricted it with cultural norms. Typically these norms involve marriages while the couple are still

children. The families chose partners from a proper kin group to preserve the "*system of kinship, ritual and obligation*" in that culture. Even so, that does not mean the absence of romance. For example, in Nigeria, relatives found a first wife for a man. However, if he was wealthy enough, he could afford to have additional wives. These later wives were more likely to involve romantic attachments.

Another example involves the aborigines in Australia's Outback, studied by Dr. Victoria Burbank, and anthropologist from UC Davis. For centuries, marriages were arranged when children were very young. The girl was always married before menarche, even as young as 9 years old. However, early in this century, missionaries came into contact with these groups. The missionaries pushed them to delay marriage until adolescence. This delay allows the youngsters to become more independent and to be influenced by modern songs and movies. Young girls now break away from the arranged marriages of their grandfather's era. According to Burbank, "*They prefer to go off for a 'date' with someone they like, get pregnant, and use that pregnancy to get parental approval for the match.*" Of the couples that Burbank studied, only one girl married the man selected for her. (Of course, even if you don't marry for love, romantic love can develop later in the relationship.)

The older generations in these cultures grieve the loss of arranged marriages, seeing this as the death of traditional values and obligations. Rather than seeing it as the destruction of a lifestyle, Dr. William Jankowiak, an anthropologist at the University of Nevada, views it more as an adaptation.

*"Love matches (develop) a new unit that disregards the economic and social goals of the family of origin.... But as romantic marriage becomes more common in a given culture, the old, traditional bonds weaken, though they may emerge in new forms to accommodate the change."*

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\* Adapted from Daniel Goleman's "after Kinship and Marriage, Anthropology Discovers Love," *Themes of the Times: Sociology*, Prentice Hall Publishing, Fall 1993, page 10. Originally printed in *The New York Times*, November 24, 1992.