

Conceptions of Limerence

Introduction

To document the visibility and importance of sexual love to the human experience, one need only turn one's imagination across one's own private wealth of knowledge derived from films, opera, the classics in literature, popular songs, biography, and history. Yet the subject of love had not received scientific attention a hundred years after the founding of the first psychological laboratory and the assertion of the field of psychology as a serious scientific discipline. It was, and in many quarters is still, patently accepted that romantic love was invented by French troubadours of the Middle Ages and is therefore a matter best handled by poets, philosophers, and novelists¹. In the typical psychology textbook during the first half of the twentieth century not even 'maternal love' was discussed.

It was in this context that, more than three decades ago, I began systematic research into the condition that came to be called 'limerence'. The study of being in love differed from traditional psychological research in its use of self-reports and informant consensus. Through the multifarious unique experiences of particular human beings asked about romantic love, at first through questionnaires, later through extensive interviewing, there emerged a distinct experiential pattern. The term limerence¹ was an arbitrary word created for a single occasion that thereafter proved too useful to be discarded. Since publication of 'Love and Limerence: The Experience of being in Love' in 1979, the term has gradually spread until today, while not in the Oxford English Dictionary and avoided by many contemporary writers on romantic love, it appears in textbooks, in scientific writings, on talk shows, in advice columns and in the Lyrics of popular songs. Unfortunately, although perhaps inevitably, others seldom use it in quite the way originally intended, but its endurance suggests the need for a term for a type of love that differs from other conditions also called love.

Acceptance of the term, still far from universal, was not immediate. Some people reacted unfavorably to the word itself as well as to the audacity of someone who would invent a term without roots in existing language. I sympathize and even attempted prior to publication to change the word to 'amorance' only to be persuaded

¹ Lindholm (1998), for example, analyzes romantic love as a purely cultural, particularly a Western, phenomenon.

by others² who agreed with my original inclination to use a term devoid of linguistic connection with other words in use. Brain physiologist Paul MacLean (personal communication, 1981) saved the day by assuming that 'limerence' was indeed rooted in another term. Surely, he said, the experience was a function of the brain's limbic system.³ In any case, the tenacity of 'limerence' reflects the reality of the experience to which it refers. The language had not previously provided a separate term for this type of being in love.⁴

The limerence reaction springs into existence full-blown, directly affects reproduction, and is unaltered by will or by culture. It follows a rigid, unyielding, and predictable pattern so fixed in its adherence to the laws of its operation that it is (at least metaphorically) algorithmic. The basic pattern is this: When a person, A, is in a state of receptivity and an attractive member of A's sexually preferred category, person B (hereafter referred to as 'LO' for limerence object), is presumed by A to have exhibited, or can be expected to exhibit, amorous interest in A, then A enters a state of limerence with LO as its object. One criterion of readiness is that A is not limerent toward someone other than LO. Just as the sperm that enters the egg prevents entrance by other sperms, the limerence that penetrates consciousness prevents similar focus on another person. The reaction is automatic.

Once the transition into the limerence state occurs, intensity of desire for reciprocation from LO and the amount of involuntary thinking about LO, are controlled by LO's expression of interest in A. If LO's actions are interpreted as indicating possible reciprocation, A responds with elation, even euphoria, but, paradoxically, as A receives enduring reciprocation from LO, prepossession diminishes. The limerence state, can persist indefinitely depending on a delicate balance between hope and uncertainty concerning LO's response.

A's condition continues to be controlled by perception of LO's behavior until one of three conditions occurs:

1. All hope for reciprocation by LO ends (e.g., through LO's mating with another person). But to be effective, rejection must be unalloyed and sustained.
2. LO reciprocates and enters into a committed and monogamous relationship with A. However, not even marriage necessarily satisfies this condition if LO, as spouse, continues to emit behaviors interpreted by A as nonlimerence. Only if the reciprocation is sustained and believable will limerence intensity diminish. In the ideal situation, it will be replaced by another type of love.
3. Limerence is transferred to a third person. A remains limerent, but a new person has become its object. This alternative appears to be more frequent in an environment that contains many possibly available persons, and appears to occur only if there has already been a substantial reduction in intensity as the result of either of the two preceding conditions.

² Notably, Helen Payne, the first person who showed me that experience, distinct when it occurs, is not a universal experience.

³ It was in fact either a happy coincidence or the product subconscious perspicacity.

⁴ It is often misspelled as 'limerance' which is probably due to association of being in love with romance. I had deliberately used the more technical-sounding 'ence'.

The 'selection' of the person who becomes LO marks the transition into the limerent state, but the particular person is a matter of happenstance. It is only necessary that LO meet certain gross criteria of status and attractiveness. In other words, the person who becomes a given A's LO is selected from a possibly very large set of persons that could have released the reaction. Incidentally, that the particular person is a matter of chance and circumstance is contrary to the notion that permeates folklore and ancient philosophy that there is a one and only with whom one is 'meant' to unite. The considerable information on and conjectures concerning mate selection during the past decade are no doubt relevant to determining attractiveness (Buss, 1994). However, although limerence is unquestionably sexual (a primary criterion is that the object of the obsession is a member of the 'preferred' sex and that sexual communion is its real as well as its symbolic aim), limerence is not equivalent to sexual desire.⁵

Disadvantages

As Stendhal (1882/1969) maintained, and as anyone 'in it' will concur, there is no greater human happiness than that which is bestowed on the limerent person when reciprocation seems likely. But the person in limerence is also vulnerable to protracted emotional suffering. Unhappy loves have been implicated in major historical events at least since Helen of Troy and up to and apparently including Monica Lewinsky.

To say that limerence is an adaptation selected during evolutionary development is not to imply that it is an aid either to individual welfare or to contemporary 'reproductive success'. (Reproductive success here refers to the total genetic makeup that is transmitted to future generations.) The more offspring, the greater the probability of having one's genes carry forth through the generations, but there are other factors involved. Although males of most species do not participate in the rearing of offspring, most writers assume that the participation in parenting by the human male was an important factor in human evolutionary development. Limerence, therefore, can be conceived as a mechanism that contributes not only to conception, but also, and importantly, to male participation in the rearing of weak and helpless human young.⁶

But limerence can and frequently does lead to the commission of acts antithetical to other life goals. People no longer under its spell have reported that limerence so interfered with other aspects of life that it was retrospectively viewed as contrary to personal well being. Furthermore, although limerence induces monogamous sexual union, it is also a major cause of the dissolution of mating partnerships (Fisher, 1992).

Even when not truly reciprocated, limerence may endure indefinitely. The results can be painful, wasteful, and even disastrous to family and career. Limerence removes attention from tasks at hand. Other people go out of focus and A may come

⁵ John Money's (1986) 'love maps', for example, refer primarily to sexual interests.

⁶ Many writers have discussed this issue. For example, see Morgan! 1995.

to regret the loss of nonrepeatable moments with family and friends because the mind was at the time preoccupied with a person later deemed irrelevant to the important things in life. Furthermore, working memory, the desktop of immediate awareness, is small; limerence narrows it further. So do pain, grief and imminent danger, but the distraction produced by limerence is long lasting, less influenced by immediate events, and seemingly able to feed on itself, which is why, some writers (e. g., Stanton Peele, 1976) have called it an addiction.

Furthermore, limerence can be deliberately induced. All that is necessary, as Don Juan has known since time immemorial, is a pretense of attraction by a higher status or otherwise more attractive person for a receptive person of lower status or of lesser degree of attractiveness. In the past, limerence occurred regularly in Freudian psychotherapy.⁷ Eventually, psychoanalysts found that they were dealing with a phenomenon beyond their control. The status of 'transference', originally given enormous attention as a treatment strategy by a half-century of talking cure practitioners, is, in contemporary psychotherapy literature, underplayed, even denounced, as a therapeutic strategy. Today, techniques are deliberately employed that reduce its occurrence. In addition, a number of psychotherapists, recognizing that limerence is essentially normal, but that their methods were useless when up against it, have reported using the book *Love and Limerence* as an adjunct to the therapy process.

Science is Personal

Despite its image of objectivity, science is a deeply personal process. What we do, how we do it, what we object to and what we, as self-conscious and professionally recognized scientists, stamp with our approval, depends on such matters as emotional reactions to particular problems, temperament, philosophy, training in and awareness of methodology, skill in the use of equipment, political opinions, prejudices, the surround into which reports might be published (or be unpublishable), and the various human, financial, and technological resources available for carrying out research. Moreover, scientists are influenced by what others are publishing and are sensitive to popular and scientific fashions. Because of these multiple constraints, the most important, even the most scientifically interesting, phenomena, are not necessarily the ones that come under scientific scrutiny.

Following publication of *Love and Limerence*, I received letters from readers in which they described often totally secret attractions. The gist of their message confirmed the reality of the experience of limerence as described in the book. On the other hand, when not glorified in drama or poetry, limerence can be hard to admit. As

⁷ Melitta Schmideberg, rebellious daughter of child psychologist Melanie Klein, was an elderly psychotherapist in 1971 when I interviewed her in her office on Baker Street in London. Schmideberg wondered how it could be otherwise but that patients and therapists would become enamored of each other under conditions of intimate personal detail under discussion, low lighting, and privacy. Not long after that interview it was revealed in the press that sexual relations between therapists and patients, although theoretically outlawed, were common.

one eloquent and anonymous⁸ letter writer said, 'it's embarrassing.' Furthermore, the topic may be unpleasantly intrusive to those not currently caught in its grip, particularly to those who have been its object or who may have, however innocently, induced and exploited the condition in others.

Evolutionary psychologists suspect that parts of our psyches are as constant as our five fingers. Today the 'mind', a subject avoided for almost all of the 20th century, has begun to gain a degree of respectable consideration as a topic amenable to scientific investigation. We had discovered a few cognitive illusions such as the Gambler's Fallacy, and we had noted certain biases such as a tendency to follow the suggestions and commands of others, but for the features of much of the mental landscape we have no adequate language with which to describe what we perceive. Most mental operations are still scientifically – and culturally – unnamed, unidentified, and uncontrolled.

It seems likely that we will begin to make progress with the multidisciplinary evolutionary perspective. For some decades, psychologists, dissatisfied with psychology as practiced, have defected to evolutionary fields such as ethology and sociobiology, and, more recently, to evolutionary psychology, a designation adopted by increasing numbers of psychologists who accept evolutionary theory and want to include it in their science. Thus far, their work has been mainly related to mate selection and sex differences. For example, see Symons (1979).

I am convinced not only of the importance of the phenomenon of limerence as an influence on human reproduction (a multi-topic category that includes mate selection, sex, sex roles, and parenting), but also that strictly at the level of research methodology, the results of limerence research herald a promising direction for understanding human nature. I see the limerence reaction as an attribute of the species, with environment directing overt expression. As is probably the case with other aspects of human nature still to be explored and identified, great phenotypic variety can occur despite genotypic constancy. A next step is to relate changes in the subjective experience of limerence to observable physiological processes through the technologies of the neurosciences. Apparently universal in potentiality and at the very cutting edge of human productive strategies, analysis of this adaptation may lead the way toward discovery of others, perhaps to discovery of enough of our humanness to permit control over those aspects of human nature that are undesirable, whatever may have been their role in the hunter-gatherer environment of original adaptation. Such understanding may also bring with it increased acceptance of responsibility. Many people, even some scientists who call themselves Darwinian, erroneously think that as we learn what our genes demand of us, we learn about the unchangeable to which we must adjust. But the real message of evolutionary theory is not that we are the fixed products of an ever more advanced genetic processes, but that human nature is the accidental product of a process uninfluenced by the suffering of organisms (Dawkins, 1986). If we considered ourselves to be divinely placed, it might follow that we should look to the heavens or to nature for guidance. But if we are not products of the intentions of an intelligence

⁸ It should be noted here that less than 1% of voluntarily submitted testimonials were anonymous.

outside ourselves, then we become free to alter ourselves better to suit the aims of a morality we select in our ever-developing wisdom.

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