

## **Why Study Love in Older Adult: Brief reflections on a personal journey**

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*Why would a social worker study romantic love among older adults?* Since last year's publication of my book, ***Love Stories of Later Life***, I've faced this question more times than I can count. The most authentic answer might be, "Because I could." I had tenure, and could afford to take the risk – which brings up an interesting digression into why the study of romance is a risky proposition. The more accurate response might be, "Because I wanted to." I have always been fascinated by romance and wondered what late life might have to offer. On a more professional level, there are two good reasons to study love among older adults:

- 1) *Romantic love among older adults is neglected* - it has been, for decades. Those who research love tend to study college students and those who study older adults tend to ignore love.
- 2) *Romantic love is important* – it is, for many people, a basic need. Our ***Code of Ethics*** holds that "[t]he primary mission of social work is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people."

### **A Neglected Topic**

In 1973 Robert Kastenbaum chastised the APA Task Force on Aging for neglecting the topic. He said, "We do not have a comprehensive gerontology unless we know something about this realm...Loving is not encompassed by the frequency of reported sexual interests and activities...All the 'dirty old men' jokes in the world do not dilute the poignancy of love and sex in later life." Yet in over three decades since his complaint, few gerontologists have ventured to write about love or romance.

I think social workers and gerontologists are uncomfortable with the notion of late life romance. A colleague of mine once suggested that if I write on the topic I use a pseudonym! The topic taps into our latent ageism and makes us squirm. Once, while addressing a conference of mental health professionals, I asked my audience, "How many of you ask your clients about romantic love as part of your assessment?" In that room of 200 professionals, two hands went up—and one of them was my student! Several people spoke up to explain that it would be "unprofessional" to ask about love. As one woman explained, "We can ask clients about their primary relationships, but we should not use the word 'love.' Lately I've noticed papers and posters at GSA on "dyadic relationships." Could it be that romantic love is just a little bit scary? Too unpredictable? A little close to home? Do we use professional jargon to distance ourselves from discomfort?

### **The Importance of Love**

Some feel that romantic love is not relevant or important to older adults. This myth is widespread, permeating even the academic ranks. But it is just that, a myth. During the five years I spent researching love in later life I spoke to hundreds of older adults who told me that romance is not only relevant and important, it is "vital" in the dictionary sense of "Necessary to the continuation of life; life-sustaining."

So that is why in 2003 I embarked on the study of romantic love in later life. My students and I asked hundreds of older adults to tell us their love stories and to share the insights and beliefs that have resulted from a lifetime of experience. Looking back, this work was the most fun I've ever had as an academic. It changed my life, and the book practically wrote itself!

### **Research and Personal Change**

One of the great lessons for me was how irrelevant gender could be to the emotional experience of romance. It's hard to write about this because I am sure you won't believe me. But time and again, I read a poignant response to our Internet survey and said to myself, "This has to be a woman." But when I looked, it was a man. I searched over and over for gender differences that simply didn't emerge in that sample of over 600 elders. I think the "Men are from Mars" guy missed the boat; or perhaps he feeds into a cherished belief that the opposite sex is, indeed, opposite. Maybe when responding on the Internet men were able to let go of the constraints that ordinarily limit their emotional expressiveness. Or maybe men who are willing to talk or write about love are special. At any rate, reading their personal narratives has changed my understanding of men – for the better, I think.

This raises the interesting issue of how interviews on delicate topics can affect the interviewer. My students and I were frequently exhausted after an interview. I finally decided that we should limit ourselves to two per day. Mostly I think we were dealing with what the psychoanalytically-inclined would call "counter-transference." Those interviews had a way of bringing up personal baggage that we didn't even know was there! Our weekly debriefing sessions became remarkably personal and – yes – fulfilling.

Often what came up was appallingly judgmental. Indeed, in one of my longest interviews (totaling six hours) I found my inner prude raising Cain as a 90-something man insisted on telling me about his extra-marital sexual adventures. Don't get me wrong. I was careful to avoid inflicting judgment on respondents. But sometimes it was hard to hear the respondent over the shrill voice in my head that insisted on labeling experiences "good" or "bad." That process, too, was personally transformative. As interviews accumulated I got better at silencing that voice and listening to the person in front of me, a skill that has transferred well to other settings.

And, of course, I learned a great deal about what romantic love has to offer in later life. In brief, "Everything, and then some," but for details you'll have to read the book!

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### References:

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