Final Research Report

**Being in love: Is it enough?**

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**Introduction**

One of the most intense emotions a person can experience is love. It is part of human nature to aspire for love and nurture as it is extremely rewarding. It is a source of deep fulfillment and it contributes to overall well-being. Love manifests itself in many different ways, and can take various forms. However, it is mostly from relationships, specifically romantic ones, that one longs for this feeling. This being said, although these types of connections provide numerous benefits, they also come with challenges. Romantic relationships can be complex and the obstacles along the way are often difficult to overcome, which can lead to the downfall of the relationship. This results in a fear of commitment from people within society.

Ortiz-Osphina et al. (2020) stated that the marriage rate across the world has been decreasing steadily for more than 30 years. One of the reasons being the newer generations have an uninspired vision of marriage, because of common marriage failures. This impacts the population as a whole, underlining the importance of answering the following research question: What factors can have a negative impact on a heterosexual long-term romantic relationship between two cis-gendered individuals?

The term “romantic relationship” refers to an exclusive interpersonal relationship involving passion, intimacy, and commitment. For this research report, a romantic relationship is defined as strictly long-term, including marriage. Moreover, the term “negative impact” represents an event or an element that has a harmful impairment, or a significant disruption to the romantic relationship. The methods of this study will be comparisons and analyses of the literature available on the topic retrieved via academic search engines.

This paper will aim to demonstrate that although love is powerful, a romantic relationship can not survive solely on this feeling, as it can be outweighed by many factors. More specifically, upbringing, individual traits, and inadequate communication.

**Upbringing**

A person's upbringing influences their view of the world, and accordingly, their behavior. It is during childhood that one establishes values and lifestyle. Later on in life, childhood has a direct impact on how one gives and receives love, especially in a romantic relationship. However, the influence of parents' relationships and childhood trauma can be negative and harmful to such relationships.

*Parent relationships*

Parents are the primary source of knowledge for children. They teach them how to speak, walk and draw, amongst many other things. They also unconsciously influence their children to mimic their manners and actions. Therefore, they are the most significant example of what love in a romantic relationship resembles. Consequently, the relationship between the parents of an individual will have a long-term impact on their future relationships. Firstly, the parent's way of showing affection can influence the children in their future romantic pursuits. Namely, a parental relationship with minimal affection and negligence of demonstration of love can have a considerable influence. This careless behavior will translate into the children's future love language and capability of showing affection. This habit can represent a real challenge and require an immense amount of patience to deconstruct (Lowery et al., 1985). Secondly, according to Aughinbaugh et al. (2005), children who grew up with separated parents have no apparent model of a healthy romantic relationship and tend to be less affected by ephemeral relationships and breakups. Since they grew up with the impression that romantic relationships were not everlasting, it makes it difficult to project future plans and imagine a long-lasting love. Thirdly, parental conflict and the friction leading to a divorce can have a greater impact on children than the divorce or separation itself. In fact, it was shown that parents who try to avoid divorce by staying in an unhappy relationship have a much more significant negative impact on the children's communication skills and willingness to compromise when facing a conflict. Additionally, the presence of constant altercations and miscommunication in the children’s household often leads them to associate romantic relationships with sadness and anger, keeping them from entertaining any form of love-related relationships (Rappaport, 2013). Lastly, parent separation or divorce can create future attachment issues because of the limitation of both parents' presence in the child’s life. Consequently, enhancing the incapacity of the child to differentiate between a short separation and definite abandonment (Lowery et al., 1985).

*Childhood trauma*

Brigham Young University conducted a study on 634 individuals, both men, and women, who took a 30 minute self-report survey on childhood trauma, prior to their therapy session. The results demonstrated that the three major types of trauma that can have a negative impact on a romantic relationship are physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Primarily, children who are physically abused struggle to develop social and emotional skills as they find connecting with others challenging. This lack of interpersonal skill often comes with a substantial paucity of empathy. This impacts their romantic relationships because their almost complete absence of compassion creates barriers for both partners (Osofsky, 1999). Additionally, people that have suffered domestic physical violence growing up have a dysfunctional view of themselves. They have been trained by their abuser to think that they were not worthy of love without having to pay a price. Consequently leading them to avoid long-term romantic relationships to escape the pain and discomfort (Larsen et al., 2011). This issue is also relevant when looking at the damage of sexual abuse in an individual’s childhood. Sexual abuse during childhood also contributes to their inability to trust others and accept physical touch. Additionally, these concerned individuals have feeble boundaries, since they have been crossed in the past without their consent. As a result, they often get involved with partners who mistreat them or deal with the same kind of issues. Instead of dealing with these limitations, these survivors project their trauma onto their significant other. This leads to poorer relationship stability. Equally, they also experience a sense of isolation that makes them repel their significant other which can have a significant impact on their relationship (Felitti et al., 1998). Finally, individuals who grew up being mistreated by their parents and who were psychologically abused end up seeking that same treatment in future relationships. They are under the impression that this is all they deserve. However, in certain cases the opposite occurs, the victims tend to impersonate the actions they received and mistreat their significant other, which can lead to the dissolution of the relationship (Larsen et al., 2011).

**Individual traits**

Individual traits reflect people's feelings and demeanors. They represent behavior towards others and thus play a big part in building and maintaining romantic relationships. Many traits can have direct effects on relationship quality and satisfaction. A person's low self-esteem, mental health issues, and personal priorities can particularly be destructive.

*Self-esteem*

Self-esteem is defined as the subjective assessment of one's own value as a human being (Erol. et al., 2016). Low self-esteem affects how one interacts with their significant other, which can negatively impact both partners. According to Warren et al. (2018), a lack of self-esteem can lead to a phenomenon known as rejection sensitivity dysphoria. This interpersonal issue refers to an exaggerated fear of the possibility of getting harmed or being rejected by a partner. This behavior is extremely problematic. It distorts perception and creates a misunderstanding of events. Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2013) explained that such individuals are hypervigilant in the anticipation of rejection which results in the interpretation of threats that do not exist. Consequently, they tend to respond dramatically and instantly mobilize personal defense, causing them to push their partners away. Moreover, Murray et al. (2000) stated that low self-esteem individuals mistakenly believe that their partner perceives them negatively, in the same way that they see themselves. In other words, because these individuals are insecure and feel unworthy of love, they tend to underestimate how positively their partners see them and start to distance themselves from the relationship. A person with strong self-esteem, on the other hand, has a more accurate perception of their partner's affection and feelings towards them (Erol et al., 2016). Furthermore, the fear of losing a partner that comes from low self-esteem creates jealousy. This jealousy arises from one's insecurities, which tends to make them feel threatened by others, and in constant competition (Wagner et al., 2018). As a result, the trust between partners is broken, and without trust the chances of a successful and healthy relationship are low.

*Mental Illness*

There is a societal stigma around mental illness, that takes the form of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Wright et al., 2007). Individuals who suffer from mental illness are viewed as undesirable candidates for dating and marriage because they are considered to be unpredictable. To name a few, these illnesses tend to be depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia (Temane et al., 2019). This preconceived notion makes it difficult for them to establish a romantic relationship. In fact, even when those individuals succeed at developing such relationships, the stigma can still remain an issue. Temane et al. (2019) stated that a relationship where one partner has a mental illness and the other doesn’t, is more likely to experience dysfunction. The partner who does not suffer from a condition unconsciously attributes every change of mood to their significant other's disorder. As a result, they are less understanding of their partner's reality and tend to give up on the relationship. Furthermore, the person without a mental illness can be subjected to the burden of care, which is a very stress-inducing experience, harmful to their own well-being. Antoine et al. (2018) defined this as chronic caregiver stress, which is due to the emotional and physical strain of constantly supporting and taking care of someone suffering from a disorder. Eventually, this overwhelming feeling can cause the dissolution of the relationship. Psychiatric disorders also impact the sexual functioning of a relationship. Symptoms of these illnesses include a decrease in desire, arousal, and sexual satisfaction. This can create intimacy avoidance, which can make members of the couple become detached and insecure (Antoine et al., 2018). Additionally, certain medications taken to treat mental health problems, in particular anxiety and depression, can lower libido and cause performance issues. Consequently, also reducing intimate juncture, making it difficult for both partners to connect and have a strong romantic relationship (Wright et al., 2007).

*Personal priorities*

When investing in a romantic relationship, one has to make sacrifices concerning their personal interest in order to satisfy the other person. However, some argue that making those sacrifices can alter the relationship in the long run. According to Betchen (2020) having different hobbies and sources of interest is a substantial reason for distance in a relationship. This phenomenon is common when a partner has a distinct passion that the other doesn't. Even if the hobby is somewhat mundane, and doesn’t seem like it would create important issues, it can become a primary source of arguments and remoteness in a relationship. It can create disagreements on the time invested in the activity and the amount of money spent on the hobby. As a result, the partner who prioritizes a particular pursuit can feel embedded to restrict themselves from practicing their hobby as often as possible, which is restrictive and can eventually lead to the end of the relationship (Betchen, 2020). Additionally, values constitute a remarkable part of identity. Thus, emphasizing the importance of agreeing on certain habits and beliefs with a partner. For example, a relationship between a smoker and a non-smoker. The presence or the absence of participation in these nicotine-involved activities constitute completely distinct lifestyles. A non-smoker will tend to try and change the habits of the smoker. However, this results in expectations from the partner who doesn’t smoke, and pressure on the partner who does (Fleming et al., 2010). This could lead to disappointment and a feeling of unimportance. Furthermore, a conflict in values can also appear when it comes to the education of a child. One can have a different parenting style than their partner, which can lead to constant arguing on the correct approach to discipline and child-raising (Roggman et al., 2004). Finally, personal beliefs concerning religion have an immense role in the way someone acts and lives, because it, for the most part, gives a sense to the believer’s life. The Pew Research Center (2016) stated that 44% of adults believe that sharing religious beliefs is primordial for a successful [marriage](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/marriage). This is explained because coming from different ethnic and religious backgrounds creates quarrels on certain topics. Moreover, according to Perry (2014), this difference in religious origins can create disapproval of the other partner's family. Thus, putting an outside source of pressure on the relationship from loved ones. In brief, sharing hobbies, values, and beliefs greatly helps the longevity and tenacity of the relationship.

**Inadequate communication**

Communication plays a vital role in everyday life. Not only does it allow people to create relationships, but it is also key to maintaining healthy boundaries with others. This being said, there are specific methods of communication that can have negative impacts on romantic relationships if dismissed. More non-traditional methods of communication, such as social media, can also have an immense influence on relationships.

*Methods of communication*

Proper communication is the foundation of a healthy romantic relationship as it is a way to feel understood and accepted by the other person. On the other hand, poor communication can create a sentiment of loneliness, disconnection, and dissatisfaction. It also lowers expectations of a long-term relationship. There are two main methods of communication: oral and nonverbal. Oral communication is a direct way to express feelings, to transmit ideas from one person to another. Inadequate oral communication can lead to a misunderstanding of events, which creates the escalation of a conflict (DeLamater et al., 2018).

In addition, not communicating internal feelings regarding everyday life can be particularly harmful to a romantic relationship. Problems at work and issues with friends or family can be particularly stressful. However, if this feeling is not communicated, especially in a relationship, this stress can be put upon the other person. Lederman et al. (2010) conducted an experiment on 690 cis-gendered individuals in Switzerland, who formed a total of 345 heterosexual couples, both married and not married. This study had the goal to analyze the impact of outside stress factors on relationships, due to lack of communication. When comparing the results, there was a clear correlation between outside stress and relationship distress. This study shows how the lack of communication between partners can have detrimental effects on a romantic relationship. Moreover, poor non-verbal communication can also be harmful to relationships. Non-verbal communication refers to active listening, body language, and physical touch. It creates a sense of trust and intimacy between two partners. If disregarded, a lot of information can be overlooked, leading to an unhealthy romantic relationship. Sternberg et al. (2022) pointed out that non-verbal communication is also essential to signal interest in another person. Indeed, the initial phase of human relationships is often created by nonverbal cues, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and even posture. Thus highlighting the importance of both oral communication and nonverbal communication for the success of a romantic relationship.

*Social media*

There are 81% of Americans who have a social media account and who are actively using it (Kenp, 2022). This statistic truly shows the impact and the role social media has in today’s society. It has a direct effect on how people communicate with others, especially lovers in a relationship.Face-to-face conversations between partners are often replaced by online communication, which doesn't require any vocal exchanges, making them seem faster and easier. However, this form of communication often leads to misunderstandings. Moreover, it creates a lack of non-verbal expression, which is crucial in the communication process. For example, the tone of voice, facial cues, and body language. This deficit leads to negative outcomes such as fights and a lack of trust (Coyne et al., 2011). Another consequence of mainly conversing online in a relationship is that it doesn’t bring satisfaction and connection between the two individuals (Baym et al., 2007). As a result, partners can feel distanced, as the conversation will lack depth and substance. This illustrates why this new form of communication should not replace the traditional approach. Social media can also have a negative impact on romantic relationships because it exposes individuals to more possibilities and makes meeting new people more accessible. Costa (2016) explained: “Users constantly navigate between a public space where they can meet new people [...] and a private space where they can maintain secret conversations with lovers”. This aspect of social media leads individuals to have unfaithful behavior. Social media platforms can make negative actions, like flirting, seem acceptable as they appear far from reality (Costa, 2016). This issue takes on an even greater dimension when there is a lack of communication and boundaries between partners. Thus increasing jealousy and apprehension levels in the relationship.

**Conclusion**

Following all the elements presented above, romantic relationships can not be sustained by love on its own, as many factors can perturb the stability of a relationship. The research question being *What factors can have a negative impact on a heterosexual long-term romantic relationship between two cis-gendered individuals?, the* objective of this paper was achieved. Indeed, this study proved that love can be outweighed by negative factors. To be precise, upbringing, individual traits, and inadequate communication. This was proven by analyzing the correlation between an unhealthy romantic relationship that stems from the negative effects of parent relationships and childhood trauma. Underlining the impact of low self-esteem, mental illness, and individual traits on the partner and in the relationship itself. As well as recognizing the importance of a good communication system and moderate use of social media.

The knowledge obtained from this paper is useful for students in psychology and experts on the subject, but mostly for society as a whole since it is a topic that concerns everyone. Demonstrating what can negatively impact a relationship is a way to influence people to apply healthy habits in favor of maintaining their romantic relationship. Therefore, promoting general well-being and fulfillment within society.

In the last two decades, on a global scale, but especially in North America, the LGBTQ+ movement has gained immense popularity which leads to a more tolerant population (Bhatia, 2020). For future research, it could be worth evaluating if homosexual individuals encounter more challenges in romantic relationships as opposed to heterosexual individuals. This would be representative of today's society, while also promoting inclusion and diversity.

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