Different understandings of love

by

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What is love? People's understandings of love and their attempts to find and create it, significantly influence how they live their lives. This short reflection suggests that examining and deconstructing philosophies of love can open up meaningful realms for therapeutic explorations.

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In my therapy practice with individuals and families, I have had the privilege to hear stories of many adults, men and women. Sadly, the stories I hear about their lived experiences with loved ones are often saturated with complaints and/or statements of self-blame:

'He said he would love me for the rest of his life, now he only concentrates on his work.'

'She nags all the time and is no longer the sweet little angel she was when we first met.'

'I've done it all out of love, can't she see that I've been making sacrifices just to make her happy?'

'It's all my fault. I should have done more to save the marriage. I'm supposed to stay home to take care of the family.'

As a human soul and a therapist, I have always questioned how love – a word used to cover a variety of different experiences and relationships – can turn into (self)-blame? What are the values that underlie the blaming behaviour? As therapists, how can we unpack and deconstruct 'blaming' and 'loving' in ways that are meaningful to those who consult us and also to ourselves?

So what is love? The great impact of Socrates' idea on the philosophy of love has been richly described and discussed (Price 1989; Richard White 2001). Socrates' idea is that love involves a complete devotion to the other person, that it requires self-abandonment or self-sacrifice, and the loss of one's own self-rule and subjection to another. This has become an ideal that has helped to condition much of our thinking and even experience of passionate love in the modern era. Love and autonomy are therefore viewed as mutually exclusive. The moral significance (Kittay 1999; Wagoner 1997) of love has become a dominant discourse governing our behaviour and the evaluation of self and other.

The moral significance of love is even more explicit in Chinese culture. In Chinese, the word 'love' walks hand-in-hand with benevolence (*jen*), the primary Confucian virtue, which incorporates the interests of others as one's own, and serves as the blueprint for the Confucian Way and human perfection (Berthrong 1998; King 1985; Li 1986). As such, women are expected to be soft, caring, and sentimental, and a good man responsible, tender, and protective. Working hard for the betterment of the family is an expression of love for men, whereas taking good care of the family is an expression of love for women. Both men and women expect and are expected to sacrifice themselves.

While this dominant discourse, with its historical and political origin, continues to shape individual thinking, action and people's preferred identities, it has also been challenged, particularly its subjection of women to the private realm and submissive role.

These days, a different philosophy of love is also at work. In this version, love is seen as a stimulus to personal transformation, one that can lead to self-knowledge and self-fulfilment as the most complete expression of 'who we are' (Richard White 2001). This understanding of love invites a quest for individualism, autonomy and independence, and

serves as a competing discourse in human relationships. As therapists, we can be tempted to step into this philosophy of love and begin facilitating intimate partners in negotiations of their 'personal boundaries', assuming this will best satisfy their 'needs' for autonomy and interdependence. This practice is rarely questioned.

In our therapeutic work, and in our own lives, how can we avoid being torn between these differing philosophies of love? How can we take care that we are neither unwittingly affirming a private realm for women, nor simply affirming that the public is better than the private? How can we take care that we are neither unknowingly affirming a submissive role for women, nor simply confirming that autonomy is more preferred than dependence?

These are not easy questions. And yet I know from my own practice that examining and deconstructing philosophies of love, and exploring their historical and cultural context, can provide different openings for our conversations with couples and families.

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