Who We Love: 
Shared Understandings of Partner Selection among Age-Dissimilar Couples

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In recent decades, numerous social scientists have argued that people are increasingly free to choose their partners, with social, cultural, and structural constraints being of less and less significance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Coontz 2006; Giddens 1992). Here, a dichotomy is established between so-called traditional societies, where “the maintenance of the social order is seen to depend in part upon the regulation of love,” and modern, Western societies, where “marriage and family life have increasingly come to be based upon the experience of falling in love” (Langford 1999:16). “Traditional,” socially ordered relationships are presumed to be instrumental—that is, based primarily on status, economic gain, or other pragmatic concerns—while “modern” ones are considered free of such influences.

Within this framework, romantic love frequently is seen as inherently rebellious: resisting power and social control (Langford 1999:16). This rebelliousness of love, as well as its centrality to contemporary couple relationships, has seen it associated with an increasing “blindness” to partners’ social differences. For example, researchers such as Amato and colleagues (2009:70) have used the growing proportion of age-dissimilar unions, and other unions characterized by dissimilarity, to suggest a shift toward relationships based on blind, freely chosen love.

In this article, I question the separation of romantic love from instrumental or pragmatic concerns, and instead suggest that the two are easily compatible. I draw on my research into age-dissimilar, romantic relationships to explore if, and how, such understandings emerge in people’s talk about who is selected as a mate. My discussion is based on 24 semi-structured interviews, which were undertaken with heterosexual people currently or previously in age-dissimilar, romantic relationships, and who were living in Perth, Western Australia (Figure 1). My analysis includes both female-older/male-younger and male-older/female-younger couplings, which I henceforth refer to as “female-older” and “male-older” relationships.

I find that my interviewees often made several seemingly contradictory statements about partner selection. I have identified these as representing three widely shared understandings. First, partner similarity was seen as important. Second, the degree to which partners’ different characteristics were...
compatible with—or complementary to—one another was understood to be significant. Third, interviewees expressed the view that, rather than being based upon a series of pre-determined criteria, love for a partner was “blind” to factors such as age, class, culture, and ethnicity. My observations suggest, however, that these understandings rarely conflicted with one another. Indeed, they tended to arise in quite different contexts, in ways that minimized what appeared to be the contradictions between them. In this article, I explore these three shared understandings, focusing on how apparent contradictions were resolved or minimized by interviewees.

**Studying Age, Studying Love**
In recent years, heterosexual age-dissimilar couplings have been frequently addressed within cultural products such as magazines, television programs, and films. Yet qualitative research into such relationships remains sparse (Leahy 1994, 2002; Pyke and Adams 2010; Yuill 2004). Rather, the bulk of research into age-dissimilar relationships has been quantitative and focuses on marriages in largely European and North American contexts as well as in former colonies (e.g., Australia and New Zealand). This research has revealed an ongoing tendency for husbands to be older than their wives (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:134, 2009:8; Lawton and Callister 2010:19; Veevers 1988:175). Furthermore, female-older marriages generally have far smaller age differences than do male-older ones (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997:29, 2005:134, 2009:8; Lawton and Callister 2010:13). In recent decades, however, marriages involving larger age differences, both male-older and female-older, have gradually increased in frequency (Amato et al. 2009:87–8; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:134; Hancock, Stuchbury, and Tomassini 2003:25).

Cross-cultural research has also revealed a strong tendency for females to marry males older than themselves, although the extent of these age differences varies (Buss 1989). Additionally, there has been mention of age-dissimilar relationships—most frequently male-older ones—within some ethnographies, often as part of broader discussions about marriage and kinship (Lee 2013; Radcliffe-Brown 1953). For instance, marriages between “alternate generations” have been observed among some African tribes, that is, marriages between grandparents’ and grandchildren’s generations (Radcliffe-Brown 1953). Yet although there has been some anthropological focus on differences within couple relationships, this is much more commonly oriented toward inter-cultural and inter-racial intimacies (Constable 2003; Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009). Even when age differences appear in tandem with cultural and racial ones, they are not often analyzed.

This paucity of research led me to focus on age-dissimilar couples. For the study discussed here, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews between February 2008 and February 2009. I interviewed those who were or had previously been engaged in heterosexual, age-dissimilar couplings. I excluded homosexual, age-dissimilar relationships from my study due to the problems associated with finding a suitable (and representative) number of people involved in heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Furthermore, much prior qualitative research on age-dissimilar couples has often focused, largely or exclusively, on homosexual unions (Leahy 2002; Yuill 2004).
I recruited interviewees in a variety of ways. Some I found through my own acquaintances and through snowball sampling. Others I recruited through Perth-based magazines, radio, online advertising, and flyers posted on public notice boards. Partners were interviewed either separately or together, according to their own preferences. Although I sought to interview both partners where possible, unfortunately this was not always feasible. I interviewed each partner or couple once, and our discussions went for around one hour. I transcribed the interviews myself and undertook thematic analysis of the transcripts. The names used below to refer to my interviewees are pseudonyms.

I interviewed people from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, though the majority of those with whom I spoke were white and middle-class. Interviewees’ ages ranged from 22 to 76 years old, and their relationships ranged in length from two and a half months to 29 years. I spoke with 11 males and 13 females, nine of whom were in female-older relationships, and 15 of whom were in male-older relationships. However, relationships between older males and younger females tended to have a much larger age difference than those between older females and younger males. My research includes the accounts of those in relationships with a range of age differences, the smallest being seven years and the largest 30.

There has been a considerable amount of debate as to what constitutes an age difference (Amato et al. 2009; Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993). Given that larger age differences are more common and more widely accepted when the older partner is male, it becomes problematic to define age-dissimilar, female-older relationships in the same way as male-older ones (Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993:101). Some researchers have dealt with this by arguing that what constitutes an age-dissimilar relationship varies according to the gender of the older partner (Amato et al. 2009:87; Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993:101). In such cases, the age difference required for a female-older relationship to be labeled as age-dissimilar is many years smaller than that required for a male-older relationship to be similarly labeled. Moreover, what constitutes a notable age difference is highly cross-culturally and historically variable (Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993:101–2). Thus, I judge what counts as an age dissimilarity to be highly variable, depending on factors such as gender and partners’ social roles.

It was clear from my conversations with interviewees that the vast majority of them saw their relationships as based on romantic love. As my discussion focuses on the formation of relationships, I employ the term “romantic love” to refer to relationships that are romantic in origin. Thus, my analysis does not distinguish between those currently in “romantic,” “companionate,” or other kinds of relationships. I draw on Goode’s definition of romantic love as “a strong emotional attachment [between two people]... with at least the components of sex desire and tenderness” (1959:41). However, sexuality tends to be somewhat differentiated from romantic love, and the latter is generally seen as superior to the former (Illouz 1997:159). Moreover, some theorists have elaborated on the feature of “tenderness.” For instance, Lindholm
(1995:58) has spoken about romantic love as transcendent, and involving the idealization of an “other.” This love interest is often conceived of as “special” or “right”: someone whose different interests or character are compatible with the self (Strauss and Quinn 1997:191,207). While the plausibility of identifying a universal definition of romantic love “outside the moral and political conditions within which it acquires and transmits its meaning” (Venkatesan et al. 2011:217) has been questioned, for the purposes of discussing romantic love in Australia, the above definition, which is in keeping with “Western” folk models, will suffice.

Partner Similarity
Among my interviewees, there was a widespread understanding that one’s partner was or should be similar to one. It was also clear that similarity along the lines of social class, culture, religion, education, and even age strongly influenced partner selection. While, when asked, most people said that age, race, class, and culture would not influence who they loved, many felt that partners’ similar interests, as well as similar intellectual capabilities and educational attainments, were highly desirable in a relationship. Furthermore, when interviewees spoke about their age differences they often went to great pains to explain how their relationships were actually age-similar.

Almost all interviewees suggested that similar maturity levels were very important in a relationship. The comments of one interviewee, Shaun, illustrate this point. Shaun was 24 when we spoke, and had been married to Linda, who was nine years his senior, for the past seven months. Throughout our interview, Shaun employed the concepts of maturity and youthfulness to portray his relationship as essentially age-similar. When discussing Linda, he stated, “her maturity level and mine must meet in the middle, because otherwise we wouldn’t get along.” Elaborating on this statement, he said:

*I think it’s about finding somebody that’s on your same wavelength, you know what I mean? I may be 24 but I could have the mental capacity or maturity of somebody who’s 26 or whatever... I think Linda’s well suited to me in that sense, she’s not you know, all about “oh well we have to invest our money and we have to, you know, buy a property”... And yeah, sometimes there are differences. Sometimes I think she’s a little bit too serious and maybe I’m a little bit too immature, you know?*

Shaun’s conviction that he and his wife’s maturity levels “meet in the middle” highlighted an important argument employed by those I interviewed. Not only did he employ a personalized concept of maturity to minimize the age

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Fig. 2: A Young Man and a Lady, by Konstantin Somov (1916).
difference in his relationship, he also presented similar levels of maturity in partners as the ideal, implying that without this a relationship could not be successful. A difference in maturity levels was defined negatively, as a source of potential conflict. Shaun’s comments suggested that similar maturity levels were of greater importance to a relationship than was chronological similarity.

The idea that age is to some extent based on one’s relative maturity, rather than chronology, has significant implications for the ways in which age-dissimilar relationships are viewed. Those I interviewed regularly argued that they were youthful or mature in comparison to others of their chronological age. Yet they assumed that, for the majority of the population, one’s level of maturity and chronology were correlated. This was particularly evident when I asked them to compare their relationships to those of other age-dissimilar couples. Here, they framed themselves or their partners as exceptional, and therefore an age-dissimilar relationship was deemed appropriate for them, but not others (see also Leahy 2002).

As discussed at the beginning of this article, many of today’s social scientists view partner differences in contemporary relationships in terms of increased freedom of choice and growing blindness to social differences like age, class, culture, and ethnicity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Coontz 2006; Giddens 1992). For instance, Coontz, writing on the history of marriage, says that rapid changes in the 18th century culminated in the “radical new idea” (2006:5) that people should marry for love and freely choose their partners on this basis. Yet this emphasis on freedom of choice and blind love does not account for my interviewees’ shared understandings that they and their partners’ ages were actually similar in regard to maturity. Rather, this is in keeping with other ideals of couple relationships, in which “shared social interests and activities” are thought to be paramount (Strauss and Quinn 1997:207).

Thus, my findings are not necessarily suggestive of a straightforward shift toward relationships based on blind, freely chosen love (Amato et al. 2009:70). At least, this is not how interviewees thought about their relationships. Indeed, historically speaking, the rise of the ideal of romantically-based relationships in the 18th and 19th centuries was not accompanied by an increase in age- or class-different relationships (Van de Putte et al. 2009; Van Leeuwen and Maas 2002). Rather, as Van Leeuwen and Maas have found, “some barriers to heterogamy [or partner difference] actually seemed to become stronger” (2002:119) during this period. These authors go on to equate the continued similarities of partners with the endurance of an unromantic, instrumental approach to relationships (Van Leeuwen and Maas 2002:119). I, however, suggest that their opposition of romantic love and partner similarity may oversimplify matters.

The Compatibility of Partner Differences

Interviewees suggested that, as well as similarity with their partners, their differences made them compatible with one another. My interview with Mark and Khiem provides a good example of this. Mark, aged 50, and Khiem, aged 23, differed in numerous ways. Mark was
Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, university-educated, and had lived in the United Kingdom and Australia throughout his life; Khiem was Vietnamese, had not completed her high-school education, and had worked long hours in a marketplace prior to meeting Mark. Mark was divorced with two children, and had met Khiem two years prior to our interview, while he was on holiday in Vietnam. After they met, they worked on and eventually succeeded at obtaining a visa for Khiem, so she could come to Australia and marry Mark. During our interview, Mark spoke extensively about how Khiem was mature for her age, much like Shaun spoke about himself. Yet as our interview continued, he revealed complexities in his feelings:

Lara: Do you think there’s necessarily anything different about age gap relationships to age similar ones?

Mark: ... There is part of Khiem that is still like a 23-year-old... which means that there’s still some immaturity there, as I would see it as an older person. But the immaturity that I observe in a younger person is something that can be quite exciting for a relationship. It makes it, it’s different... It’s a lot more exciting, it’s a lot more fun. You don’t know what, well I wouldn’t say you don’t know what to expect, but... because the younger person usually wants to do more things... wants to explore, they’ve never done this... especially someone like Khiem. A lot of things in Vietnam she never had the opportunity to do. Come to a country like Australia... traveling the world or whatever, and yeah she gets excited. And I get excited by her being excited. So you get this vicarious sort of, like, pleasure from seeing someone else introduced to something new. It’s, it’s so yeah I like that, I love that... [But] I see some older-younger relationships as being not so free, and not so flexible.

According to Mark, his relationship with Khiem gave him a sense of excitement that his previous age-similar marriage had not. Thus, although he described Khiem as mature for her age, he also viewed their age difference as one of the reasons that their relationship worked. This preference for partner compatibility based on difference is not new (Lystra 1992:154). For instance, in the United States during the 19th century, romantic love was “cast in terms of religious experience, true selfhood, and gender complementarity” (Strauss and Quinn 1997:207). During this period, Lystra (1992:157–91) says, courtship was a time of disclosure between partners, when relationships were “tested” for compatibility. My own research reveals that the compatibility arising from partners’ age differences was not necessarily seen as a feature of other people’s age-dissimilar relationships. Rather, Mark and Khiem’s compatibility was framed as the exception when compared with other male-older relationships.

To date, discussions of partner compatibility (based on difference) have often taken the view that relationships are a form of economic exchange. In such arguments, relationships are seen as functional, and romantic ideals as hiding the self-interested and “utilitarian quest” of finding a desirable partner (Lindholm 2001:343). Yet the coexistence of “romantic” and “practical” motivations in regard to partner selection has been explained in other ways (Illouz 1997:210). Illouz (1997:11) provides an example, contesting that contemporary romantic love is linked inextricably to commodity consumption. She raises the
possibility that romantic relationships involve the “careful weighing of the prospective partner’s social standing and the ‘exchange’ or ‘bargaining’ of perceived qualities” (Illouz 1997:210). Furthermore, Van de Putte and colleagues (2009:1237) contend that “instrumental” means of partner selection are compatible with a romantic love ideal. They suggest, “even if individuals look for partners on the basis of romantic selection criteria, they may be searching primarily within a [necessarily limited] group of potential partners” (Van de Putte et al. 2009:1237). Finally, there are also parallels with Twamley’s findings regarding arranged marriages in India, where “participants draw on discourses of ‘pure love’” as well as taking family and caste considerations into account (2013:332).

Among my interviewees, there were discernible patterns in people’s partner selection linked to their perceived similarities or compatibilities. For instance, older-male relationships were more common and had larger age differences, and interviewees were clearly aware of this. As Goode (1959:45) suggests, romantic love is subject to strict social control, with people’s peers and parents influencing who is considered eligible. Yet much popular discourse suggests that love is blind. Such discourse proclaims, “the reciprocal attraction of the lovers… pay[s] no attention to the boundaries of age, class, and race” (Lindholm 2001:337). It is to such understandings that I now turn.

Blind Love
The understanding that romantic love is blind to social difference was widespread among interviewees. Here, social characteristics such as age, class, culture, and ethnicity were seen as irrelevant to the development of romantic love. Underpinning this notion was the view that relationships should be formed on the basis of love, which was by definition uncontrollable.

Caitlin and William provide a good example of how love was seen as blind. Caitlin, aged 38, and William, aged 53, had met over the Internet. Caitlin had been a student at a Western Australian University, and had traveled to Sydney to take part in a performance at the Sydney Opera House with various other Australian university students. After returning home, she decided she wanted to e-mail a male musician she had met there. This was in 1992, and e-mail was a relatively new development. She randomly chose a staff member from the New South Wales University that the musician attended, and e-mailed him, asking whether he could provide the student’s e-mail address. William, it turned out, was the staff member that she e-mailed, and they continued to e-mail each other for some time before eventually meeting. They spoke about their early relationship throughout our interview:

Lara: So what kind of qualities do you think make up a good partner?

Caitlin: A good sense of humor. That was the first thing I was attracted to.

William: Yeah, absolutely, we’re good mates. Because yeah, you know, all the romantic stuff is wonderful… it’s the yeast that makes the bread rise [pauses]. But then there’s the rest of the day [laughs].

C: I guess it’s interesting because we met online, and so we didn’t know what
each other looked like. So [we] didn’t have to deal with that other experience of having the physical attraction come first, and then you have to work out whether or not you’re actually compatible after that.

W: With us it was almost the other way around.

C: It was very strange, especially because I felt very strongly in love within a fairly short space of time, and it seemed very off to be feeling that strongly about someone I haven’t actually met in person.

W: Coz there’s a spirit… and then you have to deal with the physical stuff. Are they attractive, do you get on, do you get off?

C: What will my mother think? [laughs]

Caitlin and William both felt that it was necessary to see if their relationship would work in the physical, social world. Luckily for them, when they eventually met they found they were attracted to each other (and Caitlin’s mother approved of William). Caitlin and William had since married. Yet their unusual experience of falling in love draws attention to how, normally, people’s understanding that love is blind incorporates the prevailing trend that love is usually only allowed to develop between certain people.

Povinelli, writing about an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory, Australia and queer movements in the United States, argues that, here, “alternative practices of intimacy are found… [that] move us beyond the choice between freedom and constraint” (2006:2–3). This dichotomy of freedom and constraint, of blind and socially regulated love, also breaks down when we look closely at age-dissimilar, romantic relationships. When asked, interviewees in long-term relationships said that romantic love was the reason their relationships had begun. Yet who one falls in love with is not simply a matter of blind chance (see also Goode 1959:45; Langford 1999:32). Indeed, all interviewees assumed that there were some limitations (self-imposed or otherwise) on relationship formation. Most, however, assumed that limitations regarding partner selection came first, and that then, within a reduced pool of possible partners, a person “blindly” fell in love. The beginning of Caitlin and William’s relationship, which reversed this norm, was described as seeming “very off” as a result of this reversal.

Discussion: Resolving the Contradictions in People’s Understandings

Numerous seemingly contradictory ideas emerged from interviewees’ discussions of relationship formation. The unproblematic coexistence of many of these divergent understandings was assumed by interviewees; in many cases, people switched between seemingly contradictory notions within the space of a sentence, without appearing to notice this. For instance, Mark minimized the age difference between himself and Khiem by designating her as mature for her age, and immediately went on to say that her youthfulness combined with his maturity made their relationship exciting. Caitlin and William spoke about falling blindly in love, but also spoke about the need for physical attraction and compatibility for their relationship to “work.” Emphasizing the ostensible contradictions in interviewees’ talk alone does not, therefore, appear to me to be
very productive (Kvale 1996:34). Yet I would also argue against dismissing the seeming contradictions I observed, as these ideas were presented using relatively uniform, and often highly stereotyped, language (e.g., “mature for their age,” “falling in love”). This suggests to me that they had some basis in shared, taken-for-granted understandings.

Indeed, in contemporary Australian society, and in other so-called “Western” societies, there appears to be ample space for these understandings to coexist (Strauss and Quinn 1997:213). As Quinn puts it, “it is in cases... in which given contradictions are confronted by many people, occurring over and over again, over long enough periods of time, that we would expect cultural resolutions to these contradictions to emerge” (1996:392). Strauss and Quinn refer to these as cases of “socially approved synthesis,” where “a way of resolving the potential conflict is readily available” (1997:213).

My interviewees’ understandings that relationships are based on similarity, that their differences make them compatible, and that love is blind were rarely seen as problematic. In most cases, interviewees easily resolved the possible tensions in their conceptions of partner selection. They achieved this resolution by assuming that one’s pool of potential partners was necessarily limited (by attraction and proximity, for instance), and that there was not one single person with whom one could experience romantic love. Within this pool of partners, however, interviewees’ saw love as blind to chronological age and, often, other social factors. It was only when this cultural script was not followed, such as in the case of Caitlin and William, that the aforementioned contradictions became problematic.

This tendency for interviewees to hold multiple, complex, apparently contradictory understandings thereby challenges the separation of “blind” love from instrumental or pragmatic concerns. Furthermore, commonly cited arguments, such as those made by Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), that social, cultural, and structural constraints are increasingly irrelevant in modern love, may also be questioned. Rather, it appears that blind love and pragmatism can, and do, coexist.

REFERENCES


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