



‘I love you’. How to understand love in couple therapy? Exploring love in context

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Acknowledging the place of love in couple therapy requires therapists to reflect upon what love means to them. We propose that love defines the couple relationship and in turn the relationship defines love. In this article we explore and focus on our conceptualization of love and its influence on couple therapy. Exploring love in the context of the phrase ‘I love you’ leads us to consider built-in contradictions. These contradictions can be contextualized and understood in a relational dialectic framework. Implications for therapy are explored and briefly illustrated in a case vignette.

Keywords: love; couple therapy; relational dialectics; dialogue.

Introduction

We propose to make love central in couple therapy, in both understanding couples and guiding couple therapy. This proposal demands a theory of love, but what would such a theory look like? To be of service in the therapeutic context a theory should help couples in distress. Such a theory should be a combination of complexity and simplicity – the concepts must be presented in a simple way while reflection would then show deeper layers of understanding and richness. Not only is a superficially simple concept with deeper aspects of service to therapists but it may also be more easily understood for the couples involved in therapy. It may stay close to the tacit knowledge of the couples themselves. The concept of love offers just these advantages. ‘Despite the fact that love is one of the most polysemous words in English language, people generally know what the person using the word is trying to communicate’ (Berscheid, 2006, p. 171).

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We assume that couples and therapists all understand what they mean by love: this seems to be a silent understanding. We find theoretical support for this in the work of Fehr and Russel (1991). They propose that love is one of those concepts that can best be understood in a prototypical way. People know if an experience matches a concept through its resemblance to a model, a prototype. This unspoken agreement allows couples and therapist to work together; with love being central in the endeavour. People's implicit theories are influenced by recent cultural theories of love (Fehr and Russel, 1991); for instance, the way romantic love is limited to the relationship of two adults reflects the influence of culture and history (Beall and Sternberg, 1995). Furthermore, if the meaning of love is socially constructed this meaning is ever evolving (Noller, 1996). Nevertheless, different constructions of love are available in one society at any one time (Noller, 1996).

However, as therapists we have a responsibility to deconstruct this silent understanding. Therapy being a dialogue (Rober, 2005), our own professional and personal ideas on love will influence the therapeutic encounter (Rober, 2011). Consequently, in the following we define love from a different theoretical framework, followed by our own understanding of love.

Outside couple and family therapy, especially in social psychology, the study of love typically produces taxonomies (Hendrick, 2004; Lee, 1973; Marston *et al.*, 1998; Sternberg and Weis, 2006). These taxonomies have in common that they discern different shapes love can take, such as liking, passionate love and companionate love. These researchers all agree that these styles (Hendrick, 2004; Lee, 1973), stories (Sternberg, 1995) or ways (Marston *et al.*, 1998) can be combined in infinite ways so as to reconstruct the subjective experience of love. However, Watts and Stenner (2005) suggest that taxonomies cannot capture the holistic quality of the experience of love.

In couple and family therapy literature two meanings of love can mainly be found. Firstly, some authors see love as a general feature of the human condition (Linares, 2001, 2006; Maturana and Varela, 1992; Seikkula and Trimble, 2005). This feature allows us to be in empathic dialogue with others. Hindrance of this love leads to psychopathology (Linares, 2001, 2006). Secondly, in the realm of couple therapy the work of Susan Johnson equates love to adult attachment (Johnson, 2003a). In doing so, love as attachment has a theoretical basis (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). We agree with Johnson (2003a, 2003b, 2008) that conceptualizing love as attachment is valuable in

understanding what is going on with couples in therapy. It becomes easier to empathize when emotion is involved; emotions and emotional patterns become more predictable and bonding instead of conflict becomes central in couples and in couple therapy.

However, the equation of love to attachment is not quite sufficient. Love seems to cover something more. Therefore, we propose that attachment is part of the conceptualization of love but is not the whole. We see love as being a more encompassing concept. Now, instead of understanding the couple in the context of attachment we propose to understand what is going on in couple therapy under the umbrella of love. One of the great advantages of this approach is that the therapist comes closer to the world of the clients instead of the clients having to learn the language of the therapist (Seikkula and Trimble, 2005).

In this article we reflect on the meaning of love in context. Hereby we want to enrich the conversation on love, aiming at a more complex and thicker theory of love. We hope that giving more content to love will help us and the couples to understand their conversations, interactions, and emotions in the context of this love. What does love mean in the context of the phrase 'I love you/you love me'?¹ This phrase is the simple anchor point to search for complexity. Our reflection will show that complexity is an essential part of love. Furthermore, we consider love to be relational in essence. Our reflection is indebted to the relational dialectical framework proposed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). Thus, first we present the essential features of this theory then incorporate our analysis of love into it. To illustrate the consequences of this analysis we present short clinical vignettes.

Relational dialectics: opposing forces are essential in love relationships

The relational dialectic framework of Baxter and Montgomery (1996) represents a theoretical orientation to communication that is based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin *et al.*, (1981, 1984). Three elements of this theory are especially important to our analysis of love. Baxter and Montgomery state that (i) opposing forces are a given in a

¹ In fact whenever we write 'I love you' in this text, we should write 'I love you/you love me'. The reason why we should do this is what Levine (2007) calls the two-sided ambition of love: to be loved and to be able to love another. For ease of reading, however, we have shortened the phrase to 'I love you'.

relationship, (ii) opposing forces and the ongoing dialogue between them are essential for evolution, for 'life' in social relationships and (iii) opposing forces should not be resolved.

Opposing forces are a given in a relationship

In a relational dialectical perspective 'Social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies' (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 3). To Baxter and Montgomery these oppositions form a unity together: 'the oppositional tendencies are unified practically and interactively as interdependent parts of a larger whole' (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 9). Baxter and Erbert (1999) specify three interdependent oppositions in romantic relationships. Firstly, the connectedness-autonomy dialectic refers to the tension between wanting to connect and yet needing to maintain individuality. Secondly, the stability-change dialectic concerns the tension between the need for things to stay the same, to be familiar within a relationship and, equally, the need for change, for novelty. Interdependent with the previous two, the third main opposition they propose is the one between openness and closedness (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). People want to share in a relationship and at the same time they want to keep a certain degree of privacy. Complete openness would end the desire to know the other. These tensions are all mutually dependent. For instance, the tension between openness and closedness is embraced with connectedness-autonomy and stability-change. If one opens up to the partner one might desire the connection with the partner and at the same time fear the loss of autonomy or fear the changing of the relationship. All three of the opposing forces can function on multiple levels.

Ongoing dialogue between opposing forces keeps a relationship alive

The ongoing dialogue between the unified forces is what keeps a relationship alive. Baxter and Montgomery (1996, p. 73) state: 'A relationship's end is marked by a dialogic silence – that is, the absence of contradiction. A relationship thus is constituted in and through its dialogic complexity'. They understand this as maintaining a 'both/and' instead of an 'either/or' stance. Being a given, the push and pull between the forces can never stop. In a living relationship the complexity of the opposing forces keeps the dialogue going. As a consequence, the living relationship is ever changing. Thus, not only the

persons involved are ever changing in a relationship, the relationship itself is in a constant flux. A relationship is forever under construction. The ongoing dialogue between the opposing forces can never find a stable and fixed point of equilibrium. When dialogue between opposing forces stops a relationship gets stuck. Then the relationship is in danger of dying. Couples in distress recognize this as an impasse. The relational impasse is a well described phenomenon. It carries different names in the literature, such as demon dialogues (Johnson, 2008), impasse (Scheinkman and Fishbane, 2004) or emotional gridlock (Schnarch, 1991).

Contradictions are not resolved

The ongoing dialogue between the given, unified, opposing forces, then, is the basis of relational life. As a consequence the opposing forces are not resolved and should not be resolved. It is the opposition itself and the ongoing dialogue ensuing from it that achieves a positive experience. Thus, contradictions do not reside in 'bad' or 'sick' relationships. They are constitutive for every love relationship. In this sense it would be counterproductive to try to eliminate them.

As a social system a couple that is able to embrace the opposing forces in dialogue has greater possibilities of adaptation than one that cannot. Such couples should be better equipped to respond to changes in the external or internal environment. Having this greater reservoir of opposing forces available allows for more variation in adaptation to an ever-changing environment.

Reflecting on love: opposing forces in 'I love you'

Our own analyses of 'I love you/you love me' leads us to similar tensions, opposing forces, to the ones observed by Baxter and Erbert (1999). We describe how love encapsulates three main opposing forces: firstly we describe the tension between connectedness and autonomy, secondly we refer to the need for stability and change and how this is connected to growth through love, and thirdly, we refer to openness and closedness and its connections to the quality of uniqueness important in love relationships.

You and me ... the unity of you and me

The mere reflection on 'I love you/you love me' points to the centrality of autonomy and bonding in love relationships. A relationship needs

two individuals (you and I) and a bond between them known as love. The desire to connect and the desire to remain separate are a given in a love relationship. Love allows for the two desires to exist together.

Several theoretical frames have used different concepts to grasp variations on this same theme. In an attachment framework the 'secure base/exploration' and 'bond/autonomy' duality has been stressed (Hazan and Shaver, 1987, Mikulincer *et al.*, 2002, Johnson, 2003a). Differentiation theories (Kerr and Bowen, 1988; Schnarch, 1991) used concepts such as individuality and togetherness. Somehow these theories seem to lead, be it only in the mind of the reader, to a more unilateral reading of these opposing forces. Either the connection or the autonomy side seems to be valued more.

Similar to the relational dialectic framework we want to stress the importance of the coexistence of both forces (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Gilligan, 1997). Becoming a part of a greater whole and being oneself are equally important. A relationship exists as a meeting of two people in which there is a need for unity and for individuality. Simultaneously tolerating both, being part of a greater whole through connection and being oneself is the ambition of a love relationship. How can we understand this? These seemingly opposing forces are two parts of one whole. Both are essential for a love relationship. Connection also demands a distance: autonomy forms this distance. Thus distance is inherent in relating (Lavee and Ben-Ari, 2007). Separateness is necessary for closeness. Without distance, relating is 'in-difference', being the same, no difference. Without distance there would be no other to relate to. Without relating, difference is just difference and separateness is also a form of indifference: 'You do not matter to me'. Tension between distance and difference on the one hand and connection and relating on the other are thus a necessary part of every love relationship. There is always a tension between the care for the self and the care for the relationship.

This tension between autonomy and bonding has a circular quality to it. More than the desire to be loved as I am, I want to be loved by you because of the person you are. More than a desire to bond there is the desire to bond with you. A romantic relationship is not between a self and the other but between a specific self and a specific other. Because you are special to me, because you are the one I love, I want to be loved by you. Similarly, your desire to be loved by me and to bond with me has to do with who I am. The connection between you and me, the love between us, goes in a circular way between us.

Being loved as myself by you makes me grow

Being able to grow as a person is an important aspect of love (Solomon, 2009). Through the dialogue with others we become more aware of ourselves in difference and sameness to the other (Bakhtin, 1984). One can only be a self if there is somebody for whom one is a self (Van Manen, 1990). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) emphasize the importance of the possibilities for selves to grow in a relationship: 'Relationships are close to the extent that they enable selves to become' (p. 110). Because you love me I discover potential in myself. You even see potential I didn't see. I become a little bit more myself in our interaction, in our dialogue. The self gets richer and deeper. In your love for me I do not have to protect myself or defend the stories of myself. Therefore I am more open to change with you. So, because you love me, my self evolves. Similarly, because I love you as you are and because I accept you as you are, you do not need to defend yourself and your self also evolves. In this sense love can be healing (Seikkula and Trimble, 2005).

A second inherent tension implied in 'I love you/you love me' shows here. Stability and change are interwoven in 'I love you'. Loving you as you are is the basis from where you can grow further and develop to a different you. Similarly, being loved as I am gives me the ground to grow into a different me. In love the self and the other necessarily evolve. Paradoxically, in couple impasse, trying to change the other freezes everything (Johnson, 2008; Scheinkman and Fishbane, 2004; Sprenkle *et al.*, 2009).

You and I are both unique in our being and unique for each other

Loving a specific other also means that this self and other are unique to each other. When I love you for who you are this means I love the one I perceive as you. You love me because of who I am, the one you perceive as me. Noticing the differences between who I am and who you are, I love you in your uniqueness. Therefore, I am special to you because of me being me, my being different from anyone else. In the same way you are special to me. Additionally, uniqueness has a second and maybe more hidden meaning. This meaning resides in the human condition of being imperfect. Humans can strive for perfection but can never reach it. Human imperfection means that no one has all possible qualities equally developed (Migerode, 2009). Even more importantly, living and growing up necessarily means we get hurt and scarred (Scheinkman and Fishbane, 2004). In this deeper

meaning of the uniqueness, you loving me comes to mean you love some of my imperfections and scars and the same thing for you.

Couples in distress often aim at changing the other (Gottman, 1999; Sprenkle *et al.*, 2009). In this view the desire to change the other to save the love relationship is contradictory to the love for this other, for you. If you love me as I am, in my uniqueness, in my being different from who you are, I do not want to be changed by you, to be the one you can love. Even so, I do not want you to change for me to be able to love you. To be able to have the feeling of being loved for whom one is, with all scars and imperfections (Solomon, 2009), partners should be able to open up completely. Of course, this is impossible. Moreover, even if one could or might want to reveal everything about oneself, that self can never be completely known. This is fortunate: not knowing is necessary for wanting to know, for curiosity.

Moreover, as Baxter (2004, p. 3) stated in her refined analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin's work, 'Selves and relationships are constructed in the interactions of self and other'. The self is not a fixed, sovereign, consistent, knowable thing but instead constantly evolving in ways we do not even know ourselves. You can only love the me that you can perceive as me. You can see me in the way I learn to know myself in our interactions. In this opening of myself to you, I want you to love me (Solomon, 2009).

So, after the opposing forces of autonomy and bonding, and stability and change necessarily implied in 'I love you/you love me', another set of opposing forces shows. In every love relationship there is the tension between openness and closedness, between the known and the unidentified. Love implies the desire to make oneself known and the desire to know the other, and simultaneously the desire to retain some degree of being unidentified to each other. In combination with the stability-change theme this means that love evolves and is felt in the dialogue between two unique and imperfect individuals.

Analysing love in context, in 'I love you/you love me' shows us the necessary presence of built-in opposing forces in love. At least three seem to be implied: (i) partners need to be autonomous and at a certain dynamic distance to be able to connect, (ii) while partners love each other for who they are (stability), loving and being loved changes us both, (iii) to love the unique self and the unique other, these have to be known to each other, yet remain partly unidentified, closed to each other. That couples struggle with these seemingly opposing forces therefore follows from the nature of love.

Consequences for therapy

These descriptions of love have obvious implications for couple therapy. The first is a challenge to therapists: how to engage in conversations concerning couple differences and yet also be respectful towards the uniqueness of the partners for each other? We will not explore the autonomy/bond difference further than stating once more that in this analysis we hope to overcome the tendency to stress either the autonomy or the bonding aspect of love.

Ongoing dialogue about couple differences

Most obviously, this analysis suggests a specific attitude towards couple differences and repetitive arguments around impasse. The dynamic description of love offered implies that there is no ultimate resolution of the tensions involved. Yet engaging in a dialogue without aiming for a solution is not easily understood by most couples. After all, words like contradiction or dilemma seem to suggest that the couple and the therapist aim to overcome the contradiction, to solve the dilemma. Moreover, partners tend not to have a dialectical view of relationships and love. More likely, they uphold a personal, individualistic view. As a consequence, partners do not situate the contradictions in the ongoing relationship but rather position the opposing forces in a person; for example, 'I want our relationship to be open, you don't'. Indeed, many couples strive to eliminate differences rather than embrace them. Typically couples use power methods (Gottman, 1999; Sprenkle *et al.*, 2009) to solve differences and simplify their own position, eliminating the dialogue between the forces. Then concepts get simple, the individuals get simple: for example, 'that's just the way I am' and the relationship gets simple: for example, 'you are lazy and I have to do all the work'. This strategy is motivated by the idea that eliminating differences will end the conflict. We assume that this is connected to a belief that difference will end the love relationship. However, if the simultaneous presence of opposing forces is implied in love this would be in vain. Solving the contradiction would then mean ending love. Both in an attachment view (Johnson, 2004) and in this description, keeping the connection going while allowing for difference is the aim of therapy. Hence, finding a way to remain in dialogue and containing the fear that differences threaten the love relationship is essential for therapy. After all, it is the dialogue that constitutes and forms the relationship (Baxter, 2010).

How does therapy achieve this dialogue? Firstly, the therapist and the therapeutic context provide a 'the secure base' (Baxter, 2010; Byng-Hall, 1995). Building on the love present and on the desire to really love and be loved as one is, the uniqueness we described above, the therapist can engage the partners in temporarily tolerating a higher level of tension in oneself and between each other. This kind of dialogue can strengthen the couple gradually to grow a more secure base for their love. The analysis presented here can sustain the therapist in keeping the dialogue open (Seikkula and Trimble, 2005), to embrace complexity while caring for the love relationship and the partners. However, openness and closedness also cannot be absolute, allowing for balance in the conversation. This is true for the openness or closedness in speaking as well as the openness and closedness related to the ability to listen (Hooghe *et al.*, in press). A short case vignette illustrates this approach.

Juliette and Louis come into therapy after they both ended up losing their connection by choosing not to speak rather than argue. Their relationship goes back a long way. They have always lived in the same village and have known each other from high school. Growing up, they were friends and became romantically involved. Now they have four children and run an architectural practice together. The intense tension that brings them to therapy seems to circle around the change-stability forces. Louis simplifies as follows: 'Juliette wants to change everything and break their unity'; Juliette simplifies as follows: 'he does everything to keep her from growing into a woman with her own mind'. Gradually, and after building on motivation, establishing therapeutic safety and interrupting the cycle that characterizes their interaction, we succeed in finding space for a dialogue on some of the differences between them. In the fourth session they want to discuss Juliette's wish to study pottery at the weekends. In this disagreement they recognize the pattern of their fights: he complains that she is changing what was good between them, she complains he can't tolerate her developing herself. He can be helped to explain how change scares him, how he fears losing her in the process. She can be helped to partly hear this fear. She explains her desire to grow, to evolve. During these conversations that we call 'the no conclusion intervention', the couple is helped to take risks in speaking and in listening. Ambiguity is applauded, complexity is sought. This complexity follows automatically from interrupting the interactive cycle because now each must listen to the other.

In this session one of the therapists hears an undertone of hesitation when Juliette speaks of her desire to evolve. Louis is helped to avoid

reacting from his fear and to listen, thus allowing the conflicting fears to unfold. Juliette is then able to share her fears about how her changes will affect the relationship. In the next session Louis insists on telling us about a dream he had. He was back at his parental house, everything was still there and then he took a deeper look and saw that a lot of things had changed but he still recognized this place as his home. When he awoke he was both sad and relieved. He interpreted this as showing him that indeed change can be sad, that change brought some loss but, on the other hand, as he said to Juliette, it made clear to him that he had to stand this to allow their marriage to evolve. This was a turning point in the therapy.

Being respectful towards the uniqueness

Our description of love shows the importance of the circular uniqueness of the persons involved. Without this quality of love, couple therapy could create the illusion that with the right interventions one could be in a love relationship with anyone. If, however, being unique to each other is implied in love, therapy should be respectful towards this uniqueness. We have pointed to two meanings of uniqueness: being the special one and being imperfect. Therapists can honour the first meaning of uniqueness while being aware that our clients suffer from difficulties when in a relationship with this unique other. Stressing that uniqueness can be helpful in couple work:

In the session Louis turns to Juliette to express his feelings of powerlessness: 'Why would you need my approval, you're just going your own way anyhow. All I say does not seem to be enough for you ... I should shut up and let you go your way.'

The therapist reflects this, stressing the uniqueness involved:

'Do I hear you correctly here, Louis, that the pain you are talking about is not as much that Juliette has a mind of her own but that you fear that you have lost your special meaning for her?'

Later in the session Juliette connects to this. She stresses the importance of his thoughts for her because of the significance he, as a person, has for her: 'Although others like what I am doing now, feeling that you are not with me in this makes me doubt'. On the other hand, she says, she is much too afraid of his disapproving thoughts about her. The therapist asks: 'Do you mean you hide what you are doing just because you attach

such importance to his ideas? This must be tough for you: longing for his approval and not daring to show yourself for fear of losing your own desires in the process’.

Embracing complexity

Stressing uniqueness necessarily leads to embracing complexity. In more open dialogue due to the safety offered by the therapeutic context and by the growing ability of the partners to be available for each other, the imperfection of the partners is revealed:

The case of Juliette and Louis shows the tensions they have to deal with in their intimate relationship. While they are afraid of losing their connection with each other, they both protect their individuality. More than the desire to be loved and accepted by another, they express the importance of being loved by the other unique person. Because Juliette loves Louis she wants his approval, his acceptance, his love, because he is the one that is special to her. Similarly, Louis wants to be of special value for Juliette, to be important for her because she is special to him. The fear of not being loved by the other made them silent with each other. In silencing, autonomy, closedness and stability seem to be stressed. In this, the complexity of the opposing forces became lost and the relationship endangered.

Later in therapy Juliette talks about how she has always been hesitant to take decisions. Shortly thereafter Louis recognizes his fear of change. These conversations bring nuance and imperfection to the images of each other. Louis is not only the man that seems to know all the right answers, he also is lost and fearful when the traditional answers lose validity. Juliette is not only a person seeking her own space, she also is hesitant over this endeavour.

In this description of couple therapy, the task is to strive for a more open dialogue that itself brings back complexity and thus life into the love relationship. In this way an aim of couple therapy is to revitalize complexity, which implies accepting the imperfection of oneself and the other (Jacobson *et al.*, 2000).

Conclusion

As therapists we want a view of love that helps us to help clients. We came to understand that our vision of love was one of love in context. This analysis of love in context shows the advantages of embracing opposing forces and ongoing dialogue. Therapeutic

conversations are directed at creating room for the continuing conversations of these opposing forces. This comes close to the lived experience of couples, that not all differences have to be resolved (Gottman, 1999). Moreover, the idea that couples should be able to resolve their differences might be harmful in itself (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Gilligan, 1997). Research shows (Gottman and Notarius, 2002) that most conflict never gets resolved. So our analysis points to a different attitude for therapy. It is not necessarily reaching an agreement that is important for couples; it is the ongoing dialogue that matters.

Conflicts get their meaning in the context of love and the attachment bond (Johnson, 2004). Our analysis shows that some dialogues between opposing forces are inherent to love. In this sense they cannot be resolved in a definite way. A disappearance of the tension between the forces would draw the life out of the love. Accepting and embracing this complexity helps us in our work. We have also stressed the emotional and circular components of love. We think that this dynamic or dialectical theory of love is helpful to therapists. As such, an attachment perspective (Johnson, 2003a) and the one here presented are woven together in our clinical approach. As Planalp (2003) writes:

[D]ialectical theories could benefit from considering how emotions move people to one pole, away from the other, and how they experience the simultaneous pull and push in both directions of mixed emotions. (Planalp, 2003, p. 88)

Helping partners to accept this complexity, love gives more direction to therapy. As we point out, love can get couples into trouble and in this process partners aim for simplification. We propose that the fear of losing love creates a momentum for simplification. Mostly this means a division between the partners. One can easily see the apparent paradox involved: when fearing to lose love, partners tend to simplicity. This solution, however, kills the love involved. The analysis of love in this article points to the importance of reinstalling complexity and dialogue. Our view of contextualized love points to a therapy where partners strive to reconnect to love and to each other, and in the same process to allow for complexity to exist without endangering the love and the bond.

Let us end this article by pointing to one of the limitations of this writing. To return to Bersheid (2006) love is multifaceted and probably ultimately not definable. In reducing it to the description of

opposing forces and pressures we are doing love a disservice. One should remember that love remains mysterious and it remains a polysemous word. The presented analysis can thus not be final: 'the natural language of love has ... fuzzy borders' (Fehr and Russel, 1991).

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