



Articles

Romeo and Juliet: Perceptions of Love of Stigmatized Relationships

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Abstract

We examined the connection between the perception of love and stigma in relationships and how much stigma needs to be present to elicit a heightened perception of love. Participants in the first study rated several relationships on the degree of stigma each one of them faced, and how much the individuals in each relationship loved each other—the perception of the Romeo and Juliet effect. In the second study, participants read a scenario of a male, gay relationship with various degree of stigma (none, one, two, or three sources), and rated how much the couple loved each other. The results suggest that there is a perception that the Romeo and Juliet effect exists, despite evidence that does not (Sinclair, Hood, & Wright, 2014). Individuals in relationships, which face stigma from multiple sources, are believed to love each other more than those with no stigma. Together, the results suggest that perceived stigma and love in a relationship are positively associated, which runs counter to better supported models of relationship satisfaction (Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983).

Keywords: stigma, relationship, love, Romeo and Juliet effect

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Prototypes are mental constructs of categories that people use to describe different characteristics and qualities of any given group (Smith & Zárate, 1992); thus enabling individuals to compare and contrast qualities of ingroups and outgroups (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). While prototypes are useful tools to navigate the social landscape, negative consequences befall those who do not fit their prototypical category. For example, any sexual activity that does not map onto the monogamous, heterosexual prototype is stigmatized (Brekhus, 1996). When it comes to sexual activities, heterosexual, vaginal intercourse is the most prototypical sexual behavior, which opens the door for many sexual activities to face certain levels of prejudice (Reysen, Shaw, & Brooks, 2015). Research investigating sexual minority relationships has primarily studied the prejudice of outgroup members (Djamba & Kimuna, 2014), ingroup members (Brooks, Reysen, & Shaw, 2017), the effects of prejudice on relationships (Mohr & Daly, 2008), and the coping strategies employed by people in sexual minority relationships (Castle Bell & Hastings, 2011); however, a gap exists in the literature regarding the outgroup perceptions of stigmatized relationships.

Stigma is a widely studied area of social psychology; however, there tends to be a lack of operationalization when researchers discuss stigma (Livingston & Boyd, 2010), or when it is operationalized, the definitions across studies are not consistent (Link & Phelan, 2001). Goffman (1963) originally defined stigma as a socially

discrediting attribute or as a problematic otherness, which places an individual out of the good graces of their society. In the last 50 years, research has come a long way in helping uncover the nature of stigma and researchers have begun to segregate stigma into three different forms: social, structural, and internalized (Corrigan, Kerr, & Knudsen, 2005). For the present study, social stigma is of particular interest, as it relates to the intergroup relations of negative behavior from dominant groups to minority groups (Corrigan, Kerr, & Knudsen, 2005).

Social networks have been shown to have a significant influence on romantic relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). For example, a longitudinal study conducted by Bryant and Conger (1999), found that long-term, marital success was predicted by the social support that the couple experienced. The more support the couple had from family and friends, the longer the marriage was predicted to last. The effects of social support supersede the dominant culture's biases towards any given relationship, emphasizing the importance of close, supportive relationships with family and friends (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). Additionally, the different origins of support, family or friends, is not arranged in a hierarchy of importance in regard to overcoming relationship stigma (Blair & Pukall, 2015); regardless of where support originates, it is the support that matters.

Social support is particularly important when researching sexual minority couples, as they experience minority stress, which is derived from breaking the cultural norms, but mediated by social network support (Meyer, 2003). In a study, examining marital success rates of high-functioning men with autism in heterosexual couples, perceived social support was a significant predictor of relationship success (Renty & Roeyers, 2007). Additionally, in a sample of South Korean couples, where one of the partners had a disability, relationship success was also positively correlated with perceived social support from family and friends (Lee & Oh, 2013).

However, lack of social support can have detrimental effects on individuals in a stigmatized relationship. Doyle and Molix (2014) showed that individuals in stigmatized relationships reported an impaired self-image, which perpetuated the relational strain with significant or intimate others. Balsam and Szymanski (2005) found that minority stress and lack of social support in lesbian relationships led to lower relationship quality and an increase in domestic violence between the partners.

Minority stress and perceived marginalization can lead many couples to keep their relationship secret from family and friends; however, keeping a relationship secret has its own disadvantages. Foster and Campbell (2005) found that keeping a relationship secret from one's social network led to lower levels of relationship quality and decreased relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, Lehmiller (2009) showed that keeping a relationship secret led to reduced commitment, lower self-esteem, and an increase in negative health-related symptoms. Lehmiller (2012) found that stress was the major source of the health concerns reported by participants in secret relationships, as well as an increase in risky behaviors, such as cigarette smoking and participating in unprotected sex. Further, those who were involved in a secret relationship at one time are more likely to have long-term thoughts and obsessive preoccupations about the relationship post-break up (Wegner, Lane, & Dimitri, 1994).

However, many couples choose to stay together despite the stigma they face. Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, and Hatton (2007) found that same-sex couples utilize four basic coping strategies when faced with prejudice, such as self-acceptance as a minority relationship, by focusing on the positives of their relationship, ignoring or compartmentalizing negative experiences, finding empowerment from being assertive about their relationship, and reframing the prejudice they receive. Frost (2013) found that some same-sex couples use stigma and

heterosexism as a means to reinvent what a relationship is, and create a trajectory for their relationship that best suits them. Thus, by accepting that their relationship does not fall into the prototype, same-sex couples are able to set a standard for their relationship that is not dependent on the culture at large, allowing them to define their own success. Other common coping mechanisms include using humor or avoiding sources of prejudice when possible (Rostosky et al., 2007).

A seemingly positive aspect of stigmatized relationships, outlined by early romantic relationship research, is the Romeo and Juliet effect. The Romeo and Juliet effect is the positive relationship between the amount of parental opposition a couple faces and the magnitude of love the couple experiences (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972). The Romeo and Juliet effect's namesake clearly references the relationship of Romeo and Juliet from Shakespeare: the young couple that fell deeply in love, despite their families' animosity towards each other (Shakespeare, 2017). Interestingly, in the story, the protagonists fall in love at first sight, without realizing the social implications of their relationship (Shakespeare, 2017). The result being that Romeo and Juliet's intense love was not due to the effect named after them.

More recently, research on the social network effect has emerged as an antithesis of the Romeo and Juliet effect. Lewis (1973) found that the more supportive parents were of young couples, the more likely those couples would maintain, or increase involvement with each other. Additionally, a positive relationship was found between perceived social support and level of involvement with one's relationship (Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983).

In attempts to understand the inconsistent data, Sinclair, Hood, and Wright (2014) replicated Driscoll et al. (1972), and found the opposite results: social interference or disapproval related to poorer relationship quality, thus supporting the social network effect. Driscoll (2014) claimed that the Romeo and Juliet effect took place in a small window in the early stages of a relationship, where trust and acceptance are only mildly associated with the magnitude of love. Wright, Sinclair, and Hood (2014) rebutted that the Romeo and Juliet effect needed to be reframed to describe couples who endure, despite social stigma, rather than because of it. This assertion was supported, as results from a later study revealed that individuals who had a strong desire to be independent and make free choices were able to overcome the social stigma and maintain their positive relationships (Sinclair, Feinlee, Sprecher, & Wright, 2015). However, because of the popularity of the Romeo and Juliet effect (Driscoll, 2014), primarily from its namesake, there may be a perception that it still exists in its previously conceptualized form; thus, while the social support model of relationships remains the more supported of the two models, there could still be a perception that the Romeo and Juliet model prevails in our culture, which conceptually changes the way individuals treat and perceive relationships.

The purpose of the present studies is to examine whether there is an association between perceived love and stigma in a stigmatized relationship (The Romeo and Juliet effect) in an American sample. Participants in Study 1 were asked to rate 10 different types of relationships (e.g., interracial relationships, open marriages, same-sex marriages, opposite-sex marriages) on their perception of the love between the couple, as well as the perceived stigma associated with the relationship. Support for the perception that those in stigmatized relationships are more in love was shown by a positive correlation between perception of love and perception of stigma. In Study 2, participants were asked to rate their perception of the love within a stigmatized relationship across four different conditions of stigmatization to experimentally manipulate degree of stigma and assess degree of perceived love of the couple. We predicted that a relationship with a greater degree of stigma

directed toward the couple would be perceived as more loving compared to a relationship with none or little stigma.

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine whether perceived love and relationship stigma are associated. We predicted a positive correlation between the two.

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 319$, 74% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.05$, $SD = 7.13$, ages ranged from 18 to 60) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (48.6%), African American (26%), Hispanic (16.3%), multiracial (4.1%), Asian/South Pacific Islander (3.4%), Arab/Middle Eastern (0.6%), Indigenous Peoples (0.6%), Central Asian/Indian/Pakistani (0.3%). Participants rated their perception of the degree of love and relationship stigma of 10 different types of relationships prior to providing demographic information.

Measures

Participants were asked to rate a list of 10 different types of relationships (e.g., interracial, inter-religious, man and woman in a monogamous relationship, gay and lesbian relationship, open marriage) for perceived degree of love between the two individuals and the participant's perception of the stigma toward that type of relationship. The "perception of love" was chosen over the term "relationships satisfaction" as it acts as a loaded proxy for a range of relationship satisfaction definitions, as research has shown love is strongly associated with relationship dimensions such as satisfaction (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). First, participants rated the magnitude of love within each relationship on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *not in love* to 7 = *very much in love* ($\alpha = .90$). Next, participants rated the same list for the amount of stigma they believed each relationship faced on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *not stigmatized* to 7 = *very much stigmatized* ($\alpha = .87$).

Results and Discussion

The correlation between the perceived love of the couple and the degree of perceived relationship stigma was statistically significant ($r = .23$, $p < .001$).¹ Thus, individuals who viewed a relationship as being highly stigmatized, also perceived a greater amount of love in that relationship. As this first study was correlational, the second study was designed to directly manipulate degree of stigma to examine its effect on perceived love.

Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether the degree of relationship stigma affected individuals' perception of the love of the couple. It was predicted that greater stigma directed toward a relationship would result in participants viewing that couple as more loving.

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 335$, 77.3% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.47$, $SD = 7.23$, ages ranged from 18 to 60) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (54.3%), African American (29.6%), Hispanic (8.7%), multiracial (4.2%), Indigenous Peoples (1.2%), other (0.9%), Asian/South Pacific Islander (0.6%), or Arab/Middle Eastern (0.6%). Participants were randomly assigned to read about a gay relationship that varied in degree of stigma toward the couple and then rated their perception of the degree of love of the couple.

Materials

We adapted a vignette from prior research (Garcia, Riggio, Palavinelu, & Culpepper, 2012) to describe a relationship between two men (e.g., “Ben and Ronald are gay men in a monogamous and committed relationship. Ben is a 23-year old teacher for gifted and talented students.”). In the control condition, no further information was provided. In the remaining conditions the degree of stigma was increased such that stigma was directed at them from one of three sources—society (e.g., “Ben and Ronald are currently living in Mississippi in a community that does not support their gay relationship”), family (“...both partners’ families do not support their relationship”), or friends (“...both partners’ friends do not support their relationship”). The conditions were structured so that the fictitious gay couple had stigma directed toward them from none (control condition), one, two, or all three of the sources. Furthermore, the source varied between conditions. For example, in the one source condition participants may have read about society, family or friends. We collapsed across sources for ease of interpretation. Following the vignette, participants rated the couple’s degree of love on the love subscale from a measure of relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The measure contained three items (e.g., “how much do they love their partner?”) rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely* ($\alpha = .96$).

Results and Discussion

To examine whether the degree of stigma affects the degree of perceived love, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with stigma as the independent variable (control vs. one source vs. two sources vs. three sources) and perceived love as the dependent variable. The ANOVA was significant, $F(3, 331) = 2.98$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$.ⁱⁱ Tukey’s post hoc analysis showed that participants in the control condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.15$) rated the perceived love of the couple significantly lower than participants told three sources were stigmatizing the couple ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 0.93$). The one source ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.24$) and two source ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.27$) conditions did not differ significantly from each other or the control and three sources conditions.

General Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine the association between perceptions of love for stigmatized relationships. As predicted, there was a positive correlation between the perception of stigma and love within those relationships (Study 1). Further, relationships that experienced stigma were seen as being more loving than relationships with no stigma directed at the couple. Together, the results highlight the association between one’s perception of the degree to which a couple is marginalized and the perceived love of that couple.

This research is novel in that it examines not the Romeo and Juliet effect directly, like researchers have previously done (Driscoll et al., 1972; Sinclair et al., 2014), but the perception that it exists. Thus, prompting the question: Why do people use the amount of marginalization a relationship experiences to infer the love and satisfaction between the people in that relationship? Driscoll (2014) attributes the Romeo and Juliet effect to personal experiences of parental disputes over the romantic relationships of their children, and that it “touches something in our soul” (p. 313). This anecdote could be the key to the results of the present research. Because of the antiquity and familiarity the Romeo and Juliet story has, the expectation that stigma and love are positively associated is not surprising; however, it should be noted that this is a speculation on the authors’ part, and there could be many, many reasons for perceiving relationships as more loving if they have higher amounts of stigma directed towards them. For example, Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, and Rose (2001) found that one’s self concept changes the way one view one’s relationship, or this effect could be a results of a false consensus bias (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) when evaluating relationships.

An alternative to the Romeo and Juliet effect is the social network effect, which research has shown to be a better model to explain relationship satisfaction (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2007). Couples who do not have social support are at risk for lowered individual self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Doyle & Molix, 2014), and heightened domestic violence (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005). While some couples attempt to deter these negative outcomes by concealing their relationship, concealment exasperates negative consequences, and leads to reduced commitment, increased substance use, risk taking behaviors, and negative somatic symptoms relating to stress (Lehmilller, 2009, 2012). However, using coping mechanisms like reframing prejudice or finding empowerment in the relationship, stigmatized relationships can successfully endure despite the marginalization they face (Rostosky et al., 2007). Wright et al. (2014) purposed a reframing of the Romeo and Juliet effect to describe the relationships that endure, despite the stigma, rather than explaining the magnitude of love within a relationship by the amount of relationship stigma. One variable that should be considered in this reframing of the Romeo and Juliet effect is network density. Network density relates to the involvement of individuals in one’s social network with other members of said network, without the presence of a focal person (Mitchell & Trickett, 1980). Higher density networks have been shown to provide substantially more support than lower density networks; however, in the same study, higher density networks have also shown to provide less satisfying social support (Hirsch, 1979). This could be a future avenue for researchers, given the limited amount of literature regarding romantic relationships and network density; however, research has shown that higher density networks are helpful when living with major life changes (Hirsch, 1980), disabled or ill children (Kazak, 1987; Kazak & Marvin, 1984; Kazak, Reber, & Carter, 1988; Kazak & Wilcox, 1984), and marital disruption (Wilcox, 1981), making this a potentially viable area of research for development.

Several of the relationships mentioned in the study deviated from the prototypical default of sexual behavior (Reysen et al., 2015); however, it is important to mention that sexual norms vary by country and time (Marmor, 1971). Even though we used an example of a male, gay couple in the second experiment, there has been a steady decline of social stigmatization that the LGBTQA community face in American society today (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010). Further research should investigate how much stigma other relationships, who do not see the same amount of growing acceptance, need to face before their perception of love increases: an example being a zoophilic relationship, which faces quite a bit of stigma for deviating from the norm (Maratea, 2011).

While this study shows the connection between the perception of love and the perception of stigma, there are limitations that should be considered. First, the definition of stigma and the degree of stigma needs to be better operationalized. In reference to the second study, the gay couple may still be stigmatized if one were to take away all of the sources of stigma (due to its deviance from the sexual behavior prototype), while a straight couple would not be stigmatized, even if they face opposition towards their relationship. According to Blair and Pukall (2015), the different sources of social support cannot be ranked by most to least beneficial. Conversely, neither can sources of stigma be arranged in a hierarchy of most to least damage (Crandall, 1991). The varying degrees of stigma the fictional, gay couple faced in Study 2 does not represent the intricate web of how different forms and degrees of stigma and support interact cannot be teased apart so easily, but rather acted as a cue for participants to recognize that stigma often piles up on people with multiple, stigmatized identities (Sanders Thompson, Noel, & Campbell, 2004). This could explain the small effect size, as the comparisons between the differing weights of stigma are not evenly distributed. Further, without an adequate comparison study (in both context and methodology) the effect size stands alone, until further research can be conducted on the perceived weight of different sources of stigma.

Second, the term “love” in the study was used as a proxy for relationship satisfaction, which is a generalization used in the methodology for the participants; however, while using the proxy is helpful in giving language for lay participants, more research needs to be conducted to look at the relationships between the different dimensions of satisfaction and stigma. Third, participants in this research were undergraduate students, recruited from a single university, thus the sample may not represent the population at large. However, while acknowledging that normative sexual behaviors and relations are likely to differ in different cultural contexts, we maintain that regardless of the cultural setting, the perception of love and stigma will still be related. Forth, the measures used in Study 1 were constructed for the purpose of the present research and were not previously published or validated. However, the items used in Study 1 were face valid.

To conclude, the present study provides evidence for the perception that the Romeo and Juliet effect exists, although not as originally hypothesized. Further, that there is a relationship between the amounts of stigma a couple faces and the amount of love that they are perceived to have. Given the power of perceived norms, further research investigating the relationship between the perception of love in stigmatized relationships and the types of prejudice behavior people exhibit towards them could be an interesting avenue of research.

Notes

- i) We also conducted a partial correlation controlling for participant sex and age. The result was nearly identical ($r = .22$, $p < .001$).
- ii) We also conducted the analysis controlling for participant sex and age. The results were nearly identical. Therefore, we present the results without the covariates.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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