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## ON THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In this text, I discuss some of the theoretical approaches in social sciences and humanities concerning the nature of romantic relationships, stating both their strong and weak sides. I offer some arguments on why romantic relationships should be apprehended as a phenomenon extremely revealing in terms of contemporary social transformations, as well as why their profound understanding requires the combination of multiple and multidisciplinary approaches. Finally, I lay out some propositions for future research.

**Ključne reči:** mentalni modeli; romantične veze; romantična ljubav; *čista veza*; personalni odnosi; društvena transformacija; kognitivna antropologija

The aim of this text is to briefly discuss some aspects concerning the construction of contemporary romantic relationships. I offer an anecdotal review of the phenomenological status of romantic relationships, and then attempt to contextualise them within the realm of contemporary anthropological theories. It must be said, though, that this essay by no means pretends to be exhaustive in that respect: rather, it represents just an overview of different angles from which romantic relationships can be approached, and a summary of my thoughts on this matter. The purpose of this overview is to demonstrate that romantic relationships provide the contemporary researcher with an array of opportunities for investigation. Some of these avenues of inquiry have already been exploited, however, I claim that a profound understanding of the nature and dynamics of contemporary romantic relationships, in their cultural settings, calls for an elaboration and combination of different methodologies and approaches.

But let me first explain the title in a more extensive manner. In itself, it already contains one very important assumption: namely, that romantic rela-

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<sup>1</sup> This text represents a part of work on my doctoral dissertation entitled "Romantična veza kao kulturni konstrukt". The proposal for this dissertation was submitted to and approved by the University of Belgrade, Serbia, in October/November 2006. The first part of my research, which consisted of preliminary collection of references and data, lasted from November 2006 to January 2007. Fieldwork itself was conducted in the period between February and August 2007.

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tionships are cultural constructs. However, this is not the key meaning contained in the title. Not that it is by any means false. To assert that romantic relationships are cultural constructs is quite appealing to common sense, if for nothing else then for the fact that we are aware of the differences between the notion of "romantic relationship" as it is conceived, say, in present-day Congo and in present-day Hungary; or, as it was conceived among our grandmothers and how we conceive it today; or, what it entailed for African Americans born into slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> – century American South and for their masters (and mistresses); or, even more simply, the differences in its conception among gay and straight people<sup>2</sup>. These are just examples, of course; the complete list would be far more exhaustive, as inevitably is any attempt to apply classification of human existence based on culture. Romantic love, perhaps, can be considered to be a human universal or, as Jankowiak and Fischer (1992) claim, a near-universal; however, I presently know of no studies that would claim a similar universality for romantic relationships, especially not its present-day Western model (if we assume such a model exists). The cultural variation among manifestations of romantic love, and even an almost or total lack of manifestations in some cases, are taken for granted and therefore are not the subject of this text. What is the subject of this text, however, stems from the assumption that cultural construction is inevitably a process, that therefore various factors influencing this process are what needs to be researched, and perhaps would enable us to understand this phenomenon in a more profound manner.

### 1. The Cultural Construction of What<sup>3</sup>?

Romantic relationships are commonly considered a "light" topic. Enter the term into any web-browsing engine and your first five to ten hits will probably be links to dating agencies' sites, not to scholarly journals. Many a times, when I would mention the topic of my research in public, and for that matter usually quite well-educated public, it was received with a (what I would like to think was a well-intended) laugh. A lawyer, to whom I had told what my research was, said "Ah! Sexology" though he was genuinely interested in it. But the real eye-opener for me happened in 2006, when I was conducting a pilot survey of my current research topic among participants in

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<sup>2</sup> The latter is a very interesting topic that I will regretfully have to abandon at the very beginning. My research, at least in this phase, was focused primarily on the concepts of romantic relationships among straight people.

<sup>3</sup> This subtitle is shamelessly borrowed from the title of Ian Hacking's (2000) book, "The Social Construction of What".

Petnica Science Centre<sup>4</sup>'s linguistic program<sup>5</sup>. I told them we would be having a session of brain-storming on a certain concept, followed by a brief lecture on the connections between mental representations, language and culture (which was of interest to them since they were future or aspiring linguists). Then I made a mistake of simply importing the term, and told them I expect their associations on the concept of "romantic relationship". What I naturally meant was "romantic relationship as a cultural model, and denoting whatever type of relationship is usually assumed under this name in everyday public as well as scholarly discourse". Their response was quite unexpected: almost univocally, they roared that no such thing exists, that to them 'romance is a matter of the past', associated with 'flowers', 'candles', 'carriages', 'princes on white horses', 'frilly dresses' etc, in sum something they viewed with scorn or embarrassment! I had to persuade them to move on to the concept of (just) "relationship" (which is the most common colloquial form of expression in Serbian, similar to English, as in "are you in a relationship?") in order to ascertain any relevant data, such as their experience of relationships and their views on the matter. Now, these were high-school children, aged between 15 and 19, which makes them quite younger than the population that forms the core of my research (22-35). Their failure to understand that "romantic" in "romantic relationship" is used, if not only then primarily, to signify the difference between this and any other type of personal relationships (say, parental, peer etc.), and the "lameness" they associated with the concept can therefore be attributed to their age.

As anecdotal as they may sound, these examples are not here without reason. On the contrary, all of them point to relevant aspects in the construction of romantic relationships. One is that, in the domain of public discourse, the narratives of romantic relationships are viewed as something admittedly interesting, but trivial. Trivial in the sense that, at least for most people, they are not "worthy" or "deserving" of serious theoretical discussion, at least not in the sense in which politics, money, health and even sports often are. However, this "triviality" does not in any sense diminish the presence of romantic relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Petnica Science Centre is a research institution in Central Serbia that is primarily concerned with scientific education of gifted high-school children. I work there as the Head of the program in Socio-cultural anthropology, and also frequently give guest lectures in other programs. On this occasion, I especially thank mr Mirjana Mandić, Head of Linguistics program, who invited me to give lecture and enabled me to work with her students as pilot informants.

<sup>5</sup> The participants were, hence, high-school children aged 15 to 19. In this respect, they did not fit the profile of my informants, but I was interested in their conceptualisation of the notion of romantic relationship, specifically from the standpoint of cognitive linguistics.

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onships in public discourse, especially in the domain of popular culture. Just think of movie plots, lyrics to pop music, fictional literature and you will see that romantic relationships very often occur, if not as main, then at least as side motifs in these. Open up almost any magazine and you'll see it's full of advice on how to attract the (most often) opposite sex, and maintain a relationship. Look into tabloids for news and gossip about celebrities – the majority is about who's hooking up with whom. Etc.

Even if we would leave the world of popular culture completely aside – and I think that it should never be completely neglected when researching culture as such – we still remain faced with the reality of romantic relationships in people's lives. Maybe in the public romantic relationships can be relegated to the domain of "light" or "trivial" matters; in personal lives, however, this is hardly so. People invest a non-negligible proportion of time (and money – see Illouz 1998) into search for, maintenance and discussion of, romantic relationships. They fall in love, enjoy, suffer, and rarely consider it trivial.

This, then, leaves us with one important insight into the concept of romantic relationships: they are often considered trivial and relegated to the private domain, while on the other hand cultural representations concerning this phenomenon abound, and people – massively and eagerly – engage in (re)production and transformation of these representations. Therefore, it appears that romantic relationships – if for nothing else, then for their presence in everyday life – deserve to be investigated as phenomena more serious than it may appear at first sight.

The second aspect of romantic relationships that can be derived from the mentioned examples is that, in minds of most people, romantic relationships are closely associated with sex. Of course, romantic relationships can exist without sex – this is, for example, the case in some early adolescent relationships, as well as with members of certain communities or groups in which the prohibition on pre-marital sex is still strong. Similarly, in some long-term romantic relationships sex can become very infrequent. But still, if we speak about the majority of present-day societies – there you have it: sex is not only considered a vital part of romantic relationships, but very often is – at least in the narrative plane – one of the elements that define them in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, what does the incident with high school children in Petnica Science Centre tell us? Well, apart from the already mentioned (and quite obvious) fact that in everyday speech romantic relationships are most often referred to as "relationships" only, this event reveals the not-always-acknowledged fact

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<sup>6</sup> Though I will devote more attention to this later on, and especially in the research, it is not too early to note that the relation between sex and romantic relationships is by no means simple or unilinear. Obviously, sexual activity can and does occur in many instances *outside* romantic relationships.

that adolescents do take part in the appropriation, invention and modification of discourses concerning romantic relationships, not least by actively participating in them. Actually, as numerous research has demonstrated, people become aware of the existence of the cognitive domain of romantic relationships quite young – we could say that their participation in this field commences somewhere between the ages of 12 and 16<sup>7</sup> – which points to the fact that "education in romance", to borrow Holland's and Eisenhart's (1990) terminology, starts very early in childhood.

To sum up: when it comes to the factors influencing the cultural construction of romantic relationships, even from the anecdotal introduction into this phenomenon three significant elements emerge: one is the paradox between the abundance of narratives concerning romantic relationships in public and their classification as both trivial and private; the other is the notion of interconnectedness between romantic relationships and sexual activity; and the third is the fact that people start participating in and learning about the cognitive domain of romantic relationships relatively early in life, which implies the significance that romantic relationships have in the creation and maintenance of social order.

All of these elements point to some very important aspects concerning the phenomenon of present-day romantic relationships; however, they are not exhaustive in terms of what romantic relationships as such can offer to a researcher. Let us, therefore, start all over again.

## 2. Biology of Romantic Relationships<sup>8</sup>

As (among others) Richard Dawkins (2007: 215, 216) has noted, the fact that romantic relationships occur at all is quite puzzling, and, I may add, fascinating – given that there are many alternative ways in which whatever functions they perform may be satisfied. From the standpoint of evolutionary anthropology, though, romantic relationships are perfectly explainable – in terms of reproduction. Evolutionism rests on the assumption that the ultimate goal of every member of a species is to reproduce (albeit strategies can differ)

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<sup>7</sup> Bear in mind that this is rather hard to measure. While there is ample data regarding the average age of first sexual intercourse, information on when children start having "boyfriends" or "girlfriends" (whom they do not usually have sex with, at least not instantly) is much scarcer.

<sup>8</sup> This subtitle, as well as the next ("Sociology of Romantic Relationships") is deliberately reductionist, for purposes of delineation; of course, I do not claim that all approaches mentioned under either subtitles *really* reduce romantic relationships either to biology or sociology. After all, they are considered anthropological.

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– and that therefore romantic relationships offer a framework or context in which reproduction can occur (Buss 1999, and articles by Buss, Ellis and Wilson and Daly in Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby eds. 1992).

However, this does not explain to the full extent the existence of romantic relationships. Firstly, it is rather obvious that reproduction can occur outside and independently of the context of romantic relationships. Marriage comes to mind first. Though, one can always argue that romantic relationships are, effectively, a prelude to marriage. In this view, romantic relationships would, then, represent a trial – or series of trials – of union, which would ultimately end when two people would have found each other to be the best possible partner for producing future offspring. Though this assumption is theoretically and methodologically fruitful, and as a matter of fact significantly corresponds to some of the concepts I have found among my informants, it fails to account for some very important – cultural – aspects of romantic relationships. One is that people often engage in series of romantic relationships without any – at least conscious – desire to eventually get married, "settle down" or, in short, form a kind of lasting partnership that would eventually produce offspring. Furthermore, in many romantic relationships people effectively engage in series of actions specifically directed towards *not* producing offspring – such as contraception and even abstaining from sexual activity altogether. This does not only occur when partners intend to delay conception until a convenient time, but – again – equally when they want to avoid it altogether. Most of the above mentioned early adolescent relationships would fall into this category.

But again, even without reproduction, sex remains an important part in romantic relationships. Can we therefore claim that romantic relationships in fact represent a social and cultural framework for sex to occur? This is certainly to some extent true. But, then again, sex does occur outside romantic relationships. To leave marriage aside, the phenomenon known as "casual sex" or "one-night stand" appears to be culturally present almost to the extent in which romantic relationships are. Moreover, the relationship between these phenomena and that of romantic relationships – their differences, overlapping, intersection – provide a significant source of contemplation, narration and activity, at least among my informants.

Evolutionary psychologists, again, offer some solutions as to why casual relationships occur, and it, again, has to do with reproduction (Buss 1999: 161-185). In short, the argument is that men desire casual sex in order to maximize their reproductive potential. But, there is non-negligible ethnographic evidence that reproduction is absolutely the last thing people engaging in casual sex or one-night stands desire. Now, we may go into discussion about the conscious and un- or sub-conscious levels of human activity; if would rather leave this question aside, and stick to the conclusion that although there may be a biological, or reproductive, basis that governs peo-

ple's desire to engage in casual sex, there definitely exists a large parallel setting that governs its cultural manifestation, often defining it in relation to the key phenomenon studied here – romantic relationships.

I guess this leaves us with a quite obvious conclusion that romantic relationships cannot be explained only in biological or evolutionary terms. Let us turn then to the cultural or social, and see what kind of light might these shed on the phenomenon.

### 3. Sociology of Romantic Relationships

It is argued that romance, as it is currently perceived in Western culture, is historically and culturally situated. Thus, it originated in courts of Medieval Europe and reached its heyday during the 19<sup>th</sup> and perhaps early 20<sup>th</sup> century (De Rougemont 1983). The type of pair-bonding that entails metaphysical thoughts about another human being or, as Singer (1987) put it, "bestowal" of value upon another, is then an invention of a certain number of European cultures, that has gradually evolved or, in every case, transformed itself (see Evans, 1998). The contemporary concept of romantic relationship would therefore represent a derivative of the historical concept (Wilson 1998; Stearns 1982; Zeldin 1982).

However, there are some problems with this approach as well. Firstly, if we remember the Jankowiak and Fischer study mentioned earlier, romantic love – in the form of bestowal of qualities upon another – exists in non-European, non-Western cultures as well (and those in which – presumably – it could not have been an effect of the influence of European researchers). Secondly, the notions of romantic love and romantic relationship as they exist in the cultures from which they presumably originated are now becoming quite pervasive in a number of other cultures: the model and importance of romantic relationships are becoming increasingly globalized (note just the popularity of *Sex and the City* series or Mexican telenovellas). Finally, the historical and social origins of the notion of romantic relationship fail to explain the current dynamics of its existence. Namely, it is quite difficult to argue that people nowadays get involved and participate in, talk and worry about, think of and care for, something that is merely a surviving 19<sup>th</sup> century concept.

Social scientists, however, have offered a solution to this as well. Anthony Giddens, for example, (1992, 1991) famously argued that romantic, and other personal relationships as well, have suffered a profound transformation since modernity, and now – in what he calls second modernity, and other authors late or post-modernity – exist in a different form. Giddens' argument, more precisely, is that modernism gave rise to the forms of interpersonal relationships we commonly consider romantic. In this context, personal relationships

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were in fact if not a function, then a partial result of embeddedness in broader social contexts. Marriages were not results of "pure" love: much more, they were forms of social contract, not only (nor primarily) between spouses, but – more importantly – between their families, clans, etc<sup>9</sup>. In these relationships economical (inter)dependency ruled heavily – hence, they were quite stable, if not always happy: partners, for example, being specialized for different forms of activity (men for earning money, women for house and childcare), depended upon each other – least of all in emotional terms: and therefore, they rarely separated. All of this came to change towards the end of modernity, as people (and women especially – see Wilmott 2007 for an examination of the link between the transformation of intimacy and women's independence) were becoming more independent and self-sustainable, and "traditional" values eroded. In the end, what had once been stable interpersonal relationships embedded in relatively stable social surroundings, in the age of second, or post-modernity, characterized by continuous flux and uncertainty, became a form that Giddens calls "pure relationships". Now, it is not completely clear what would and to what extent qualify for a pure relationship, but the key aspects in which they differ from "classical" relationships is that they are a function of themselves. Less philosophically put, people in pure relationships maintain them simply for the joy of being with another person, and not – like in modernity – for reasons such as money and/or social status. These relationships occurred in the context of late, second or post-modernity, in which people grew increasingly mobile, independent and unbound (or at least less bound) by social norms and rules that governed throughout modernity, and the dynamics of pure relationships follow these social transformations (Beck 1992, and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Namely, partners in pure relationships are economically independent from each other, often do not live together (at least not on a permanent basis, see Levin 2004), do not even have to share much common interests (apart from that in each other), and are likely to separate relatively easily as soon as something goes wrong, or the relationship ceases to satisfy the needs of one or both of them. However, what this type of relationship loses in stability it supposedly gains in quality: partners in pure relationships are expected to be more open and frank to each other and much more relaxed in the interpersonal domain, not being bound by any external pressure or contract. Sounds too good to be true? You bet.

Despite the fact that Giddens does offer an encompassing and brilliant analysis of the social transformation of the times, there is mounting ethnographic evidence that his view on interpersonal relationships is at best a generalization, and at worst only a very idealized description. Namely, authors

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<sup>9</sup> This was (and still is) a very favoured conception among anthropologists, especially in structural analyses of kinship (see for example Levi-Strauss 1969).

such as Jamieson (1999), Gross and Simmons (2002) and May and Cooper (1995) have found that a very small proportion of contemporary researched relationships would actually satisfy all or most of Giddens' criteria. Though it is quite sensible to claim that relationships nowadays are much more independent and relaxed than they had been at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evidence suggests that phenomena such as economical dependency, power disbalance, jealousy, suffering and even violence remain influential parts in contemporary relationships. Furthermore, from the anthropological point of view, it remains completely unclear how this transformation of personal relationships is (or is not) manifested in societies and cultures that differ – radically or slightly – from British or American.

#### **4. A (Partial) Conclusion**

I believe that from what was said above clearly issues that, despite the definitely useful insights we are able to obtain from research done in neighbouring disciplines, a profound and thorough understanding of the phenomenon of contemporary relationships calls for an anthropological approach. One of anthropology's (few or many, that is the question) peculiarities is that it should be able to incorporate various angles of looking at things, combining at once the emphasis on the biological, psychological, social and cultural. Of course, particular attention should be paid to the emic – in other words, to the ways in which people tend to think about the issue in question.

My own research focused on the ways a specific group of people imagines, narrates and constructs the concept of romantic relationships, both in relation to their personal histories and as a form of broader reflection on the nature of social relationships in general. The methodology of elicitation and classification of data relied heavily on the research of mental models, scripts and schemata in cognitive anthropology (see D'Andrade 1995, D'Andrade and Strauss eds. 1992, and Holland and Quinn eds. 1987). Though it is too early to draw any definite conclusions, some things are obviously emerging. One is that a thorough understanding of contemporary romantic relationships does call for inclusion – and combination – of all of the different approaches reviewed above, regardless of the fact that they may – by some or many of their practitioners – be considered mutually exclusive. The second is that research in the domain of romantic relationships offers us very important insights into the nature of contemporary social life. Specifically, researching the construction of romantic relationships in contemporary Serbia provides an interesting opportunity to "test" and question Giddens' concept of "pure relationship", i.e. its existence, modification and applicability in a society that (supposedly?) differs from those he calls Secondly Modern. Whatever the case, romantic relation-

ships remain, at core, a form in which people construct and organize their personal and cultural realities, build and participate in social networks, and project as well as enact future. This, if nothing else, makes them a continuously appealing subject of anthropological investigation.

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### **O KULTURNOJ KONSTRUKCIJI ROMANTIČNIH VEZA**

Ovaj tekst usmeren je na diskusiju o različitim pristupima fenomenu romantičnih veza u savremenim društvima. Polazeći od anegdotskog pregleda različitih reakcija sa kojima sam se susretala tokom svog istraživanja romantičnih veza, iznosim bitne komponente savremenih interpretacija ovog kulturnog koncepta. Zatim dajem pregled savremenih teorija u antropologiji srodnim disciplinama koje se bave ovim fenomenom (evolucionarna psihologija, istorija, sociologija), iznoseći njihove dobre strane ali i kritikujući njihove nedostatke. Na kraju, postavljam istraživačku agendu za jedno sveobuhvatno razumevanje fenomena savremenih romantičnih veza, objašnjavajući kako ovo istraživanje može da produbi znanje i razumevanje savremenih kulturnih i socijalnih procesa uopšte.