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The romantic ideal of men and women involved in the relationship of friends with benefits

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Abstract

This study provides a descriptive analysis of some beliefs or myths of romantic love that maintain individuals involved in the sexual relationship called friends with benefits (FWB). These beliefs generate dissatisfaction in the couple, perpetuate gender inequalities and are in the genesis and maintenance of gender violence. The myths under study have been jealousy, exclusivity, fidelity, true love, the sudden onset of love, powerful love, and binomial sex-love. The sample was made up of 119 adults. An online questionnaire validated in our context by judges has been used as a tool for data collection. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they identified with a particular myth of romantic love. The results indicate that most of these beliefs, though weakened, remain despite the pragmatic, superficial and liberal nature of these relationships. Some gender stereotypes persist, men are still heavily biased by tilting sex, while women remain significantly claiming the exclusivity of the relationship. In conclusion, friends with benefits do not get rid of a romantic imaginary that generates emotional and sexual inequalities between men and women and is the source of problems in the couple.

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1. Love and sexuality: myths of romantic love

The romantic myths in Spain and in Western countries have supported the belief that the romantic-passionate love is the identity of a real relationship. This connection between the two concepts, love and sexuality, have generated romantic beliefs which have been considered the failure of love relationships with a high degree of responsibility

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(Gurman & Jacobson, 2002). This loving model and acceptance of myths about it, pushing toward monogamy, physical attractiveness, exclusivity of the relationship and possession constitute an obstacle to the pleasure and satisfaction. Further, they also have a key role in the emergence and maintenance of violence against women (Yela, 2003, 2005; Esteban Medina & Tavora, 2005). It has been systematically observed in the stories of women, who have been victims of gender violence, elements of this idea of romantic love on which they have built their universe and their biographies (Sampedro, 2004).

In this sense, the teaching of these myths through the process of socialization - the myth of half orange or ideal partner who is predestined, the myth of exclusivity, the myth of fidelity and that all sexual desires are satisfied by that person, the myth of jealousy as a sign of true love, the myth of equivalence between love and infatuation, the myth of marriage or cohabitation as zenith of love, the myth of eternal passion - have contributed to gender inequalities by reinforcing the role of female subordination and stigma. While women are taught the link between sex and love, the latter as a prerequisite for sex, men are encouraged to have sexual experiences with or without love, separating more easily sexual desires from loving feelings (Fisher & Byrne, 1978; Avia, Carrillo & Rojo, 1990; Sangrador, 1993; Yela, 1998, 2000; Ferrer, Bosch & Navarro, 2010, Herrera, 2010).

Today, that ideal couple lives with conflicting orientations where desire and love are not identified, contradictory messages that proliferate in a society that encourages competing values: freedom and commitment, stability and sexual novelty, independence and fidelity (Sangrador, 1993), and encourages the emergence of new relationships, as friends with benefits, where casual sex plays a fundamental role and represents a rejection of any kind of bonds. We can say that in this modern age, the representation of sexuality is at stake as an essential element of the romantic experience and the connection between love, sexual pleasure and marriage as normative in our society (Yela, 2000; Illouz, 2009).

2. Love in a postmodern society

Giddens (1992) predicted that romantic love is being replaced by confluent love (as the author called it) as the dominant form in Western societies. Said confluent love or pure love is based on individuality and seeks constant emotional satisfaction of the individual. This new conception of love is characterized by the following elements that contrast with romantic love: it presupposes emotional equality, it is not monogamous nor based on sexual exclusivity and therefore collides with the expressions, "forever" and "unique" which are typical of romantic love. In addition, it relies on the complacency of the individual, beyond gender inequalities and focuses on being loved and loving, so it remains stable as long as individuals feel satisfied (Giddens, 2000).

From sociology, also Bauman (2005) refers to these new relational patterns between men and women as "liquid love" for its fragility. These patterns are qualified as weak, compulsive, based on individuality and lack of commitment. In fact, Bauman (2005) indicates that Giddens new conception of love cannot be an alternative engagement since the break is justified when the relationship ceases to be enjoyable.

3. A new relational framework: Friends with benefits and myths of romantic love

FWB -the sex between friends- are a clear example of the transformation of the affective universe and the release of the sex of love. Individuals involved in FWB appeal to the playful character of love, shunning any form of commitment (Hughes, Morrison & Asada 2005) and maintain a pragmatic view of relationships, what they call a realistic love, where there are different opportunities to meet people and fell in love. Thus, it seems they are less likely to believe in the romantic myths (Hughes et al., 2005; Bridges, Knox & Zusman, 2008). However, Yela (2003) and subsequently Esteban et al (2005), maintain that men and women are still clinging to the myth of romantic love holding a model of loving behaviour based on monogamy, heterosexuality and social subordination of women, belief in love at first sight, the omnipotent love that overcomes all obstacles and jealousy of emotional and sexual infidelity. Therefore, this work was created with the intention of responding to this question: Do individuals involved in FWB maintain these traditional beliefs and romantic myths, hotbed of gender violence, source of dissatisfaction and guarantor of inequality between men and women, or conversely, this romantic imagination has been overcome and we have a relationship that really is committed to equality and rejects the ideal of love?

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