

# Characteristics of Romantic Love: An Empirically-Based Essentialist Account

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## Abstract

The present 4-part study reopens certain basic issues regarding people's conceptions of romantic love. Evidence collected at two sites with a total of 390 participants supports the following contentions: (1) The concept of romantic love may not be, as widely maintained, a Roschian prototypical term, but may instead be a definable, essentialist one. (2) Foremost among love's essential characteristics may be "*Care for the well-being of the partner for his or her own sake.*" (3) The concept of *romantic love* itself and the concept of a good *romantic love relationship* may be two related but distinct concepts, the former essentialist and the latter prototypical.

*Keywords:* love, romantic love, essentialist concept, prototypical concept

The present 4-part study reopens several issues on matters that we and most others have regarded as largely settled in our understanding of love. Data is presented supporting each of the following three possibilities. (1) The concept of "love" may not be, as widely maintained, a Roschian prototypical term (Aron, Fisher, & Strong, 2006; Bergner, 2000; Davis, 1985; Davis & Todd, 1982; Fehr, 1988, 1993, 2006), but may instead be a definable, essentialist one. That is to say, the concept

of love, unlike that of a Roschian prototypical concept, may imply the presence of certain essential characteristics, and any relationship lacking these characteristics may not be perceived by people as a case of love at all. (2) *Care for the well-being of the partner for his or her own sake* (hereafter, “CWB”) may constitute love’s foremost essential characteristic (Hegi & Bergner, 2010; Rempel & Burris, 2005; Singer, 1984). (3) People may have two different but related concepts pertaining to romantic love: the first of these, an essentialist one, is that of *romantic love itself*; the second, a prototypical one, is that of a *good romantic love relationship*.

Let us discuss each of these matters in turn before turning our attention to the methods employed and results obtained in these studies. This work is part of an ongoing body of work on the nature of love undertaken within the conceptual framework of Descriptive Psychology (Bergner, 2000; Bretscher & Bergner, 1991; Davis, 1985; Davis & Todd, 1982; Davis & Bergner, 2009; Hegi & Bergner, in press).

### **Love: Prototypical or Essentialist Concept?**

The intellectual custom in psychology, dating back to the work of Eleanor Rosch on prototypical concepts (Mervis & Rosch; 1981 Rosch, 1973), has been to posit two distinct ways to articulate the meaning of a concept. The first and more traditional of these is the essentialist one of giving a formal definition; i.e., of stating the universal necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct employment of a term (Ossorio, 2006). The second is based on the observation that most real world concepts cannot be formally defined, because there is no single feature that all instances of these concepts have in common (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Rosch, 1973; Wittgenstein, 1953). Thus, they lack the universal necessary and sufficient condition(s) required for a formal definition. What they have instead are “family resemblances” that render them amenable to a procedure of articulating a *prototype* (e.g., “in depression, we generally but not always find a syndrome comprising sadness, anhedonia, demotivation, fatigue, etc.”), resemblance to which is what justifies our use of that term on any given occasion.

The recent, and seemingly settled, position in the close relationship literature has been that concept of love is prototypical in nature (Aron et al., 2006; Bergner, 2000; Davis, 1985; Fehr, 1988, 2006; Fehr & Russell, 1991). This position has been maintained both for love in general (Aron et al., 2006; Fehr, 1988, 2006; Fehr & Russell, 1991) and for specific kinds of love such as romantic love (Bergner, 2000; Davis, 1985; Davis & Todd, 1982), companionate love (Davis, 1985; Davis & Todd, 1982), and compassionate love (Fehr, Sprecher, & Underwood, 2009; Fehr & Sprecher, 2009). Aron et al. (2006) articulate this position well when they state that “the longstanding philosophical controversies over the meaning of love and the corresponding diversity of conceptual and operational definitions in the scientific literature are due to the possibility that ordinary people recognize instances of love not by their conforming to some formal definition but rather by their family resemblance to a prototypical exemplar” (p.597).

In the present research, we explore the possibility that the concept of romantic love may not be a prototypical concept, but may instead be a definable, essen-

tialist one. That is to say, we explore whether there is some feature or features that are (a) common to all instances of romantic love, and (b) regarded by persons as *necessary* – as *essential* – for them to judge that person A “loves” person B. Thus, just as they would judge that, “If John is not single, then he cannot be a bachelor,” so they would judge that, “if Jack’s relationship to Jill lacks characteristic(s) X, Jack does not love Jill.”

How methodologically can we establish the existence of such essential characteristics, if there be any? The first part of an answer to this question comes from Fehr (2006) who, in discussing some new methodological possibilities in research on love, speculates that “...people may not necessarily produce the full range of important features when asked (a recall task), but ‘know them when they see them’ (...a recognition task)” (p. 242). Consistent with Fehr’s conjecture, it is an easily observed fact of everyday life that people use concepts that embody criteria that they are unable to articulate. Asked what time it is, they tell us the time. Asked to describe their friend’s personality, they tell us that she is shy, generous, and considerate of others. Asked to give an example of humor, they tell us a joke. However, asked to define or otherwise articulate the concepts of “time,” “personality,” or “humor,” they are for the most part at a loss. They possess the correct distinctions, they make correct judgments on the basis of them, but they cannot articulate well the conceptual criteria they are using or the manner in which they are using them. Thus, if we wish to identify how people actually use a term, a logically compelling procedure would seem to be to get research participants to make judgments in which they utilize the concept at issue (here, judgments about whether person A romantically “loves” person B), and then to deduce from their judgments what criteria they are using.

In the present research, something further is needed: a way to determine, not only what criteria are being employed, but whether these criteria are seen as essential or non-essential to the target concept – and thus whether this concept is an essentialist one or not. Essentialist concepts, since they have necessary criteria for their employment, are subject to judgments of the form, “If it lacks characteristic X, then it cannot be a case of concept Y” (again, “If John is not single, then he cannot be a bachelor.”). Prototypical concepts, per Rosch, have no such necessary criteria, and thus are not subject to contradiction based on the presence or absence of any feature. Nothing is essential to them; nothing is a *sine qua non* for their employment. Accordingly, a research task that involves participants making judgments about the necessity or non-necessity of criteria will enable us to distinguish essentialist concepts from non-essentialist ones. The procedures employed in the 4 studies presented below embody this logic, and are designed to enable us to determine (a) what, if anything, is seen as essential to judging that person A *loves* person B romantically; and (b) what, if any, other characteristics are seen as important, but not essential to love itself, in participants’ broader models or prototypes of good romantic relationships.

### **Critical Characteristic: Care for the Partner's Wellbeing**

Of especial interest in this research is a relationship characteristic that we term "*Care for the partner's well-being for his or her own sake*" (*CWB*). The reasons for this interest are several. The first of these comes from the work of Irving Singer (1984) who, in his classic 3-volume study of the history of the concept of romantic love in Western culture, concluded that such care was love's essential feature – that it was in effect "the essence of love." Singer expresses this in the following way: "The lover takes an interest in the other as a person, and not merely as a commodity...He bestows importance on her needs and her desires, even when they do not further the satisfaction of his own...In relation to the lover, the other has become valuable for her own sake" (1984, p. 6). In love, on Singer's conception, the lover is invested in the well-being of the beloved for the latter's own sake, and not merely for how his or her well-being might benefit the lover: the beloved has become an end and not merely a means to the lover's ends. In maintaining that such unselfish care is love's essential characteristic, Singer is not denying that there are elements of both love and self-interest in any actual relationship; his point is only that, insofar as Romeo *loves* Juliet, he is genuinely invested in her well-being for her sake.

There are further reasons for placing a particular focus on *CWB* in the present research. First, Margaret Clark and her associates (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Monin, 2006), while they have not promoted it as an essential feature in a formal definition of love, have in their research on love placed primary emphasis on a concept very similar to *CWB*, one that they term "communal responsiveness." In an important body of research undertaken over many years, they have established numerous and critically important implications of the presence of communal responsiveness in human relationships. Second, Rempel and Burris, in their conceptually oriented 2005 account, argue extensively and persuasively for a classical definition of love as "a motivational state in which the goal is to preserve and promote the well-being of the valued object" (p. 299). Paraphrased in terms of the current discussion, they are claiming in effect both that love is an essentialist concept, and that motivation for the well-being of another is its essential defining feature. Third and finally here, early findings from two studies of our own (Hegi & Bergner, 2010) revealed that *CWB* was the most strongly endorsed of 14 traditional relationship characteristics for four different varieties of love: romantic, parental, companionate, and compassionate/altruistic. If such findings are born out by subsequent research, *CWB* may prove to be the single characteristic that transcends and is essential to all of the major types of human love. Conceptually, and anticipating our methodologies, it is suggestive to consider whether or not it is contradictory to say of any alleged love relationship, regardless of kind, that, "He loves her, but he cares little about her personal well-being."

### **Lay vs. Expert Conceptions of Love**

The central concern of this research is to capture people's conceptions of romantic love and romantic love relationships. Such conceptions have traditionally been posed as "lay" conceptions, and contrasted as such to "expert" ones (Fehr,

2006). To say that they are lay conceptions, however, is to say that they are the conceptions *in actual use* by persons in the conduct of their lives (Kelley, 1983). They embody the distinctions that people actually draw when they are trying to decide such vitally important questions as whether their partners love them, whether they love their partners, or whether their son's or daughter's fiancé seems genuinely to love their child. Thus, they have a critical impact on vital real world judgments, decisions, actions, and emotions. For this reason, it may be argued that there is no better *scientific* conception of love than that embodied in lay conceptions. There are no better conceptions – no better schemas – for helping us to predict and to understand how real people make judgments about the presence or absence of love, why they feel as they do, and why they make the decisions that they do (Kelley, 1983).

### Hypotheses

The 4 studies presented here all embody the same hypotheses. (1) Participants will employ the concept of *romantic love* as an essentialist concept; i.e., they will regard the presence of certain relational features as necessary for them to judge that person A loves person B, and will indicate this by judging the absence of these characteristics as grounds for judging that person A does not love person B. (2) Participants will perceive *CWB* to be an essential feature of romantic love. With respect to other possible essential features, we make no predictions, but let the data speak for itself in this regard. (3) Participants will have two distinct conceptions pertaining to romantic love, an essentialist one for *romantic love itself*, and a prototypical one for a *good romantic relationship*. They will demonstrate this by exhibiting prototypical relationship models that include, not only love's essential characteristics, but many further characteristics that they deem important for a romantic relationship, but whose absence would not necessarily imply for them the absence of love itself in that relationship.

### Study 1

#### Participants

100 students from a large midwestern state university participated in study 1. Solicited by means of a Psychology Department sign-up board, the sample was comprised of 50 females and 50 males ranging in age from 18 to 57 years, with a mean age of 21.4 years. The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian (86%), followed by African-American (6%), Hispanic/Latino (2%), Asian-American (2%), and "other" (4%).

#### Measures

**Factors in Intimate Relationships (FIR) Scale.** A revised version of a questionnaire developed by Bretscher and Bergner (1991), "Factors in Intimate Relationships" (FIR), was used for this research (see Appendix A). Retitled "Personal Meanings of Romantic Love" for purposes of the present study, this measure informs participants at the outset that "This questionnaire is designed to get at your idea of what should be present in a good romantic love relationship." It then presents

them with a series of possible relationship characteristics (*Acceptance, Affectionate Feeling, Care for Partner's Well-being, Commitment, Enjoyment, Emotional Intimacy, Exclusiveness, Freedom to be Ourselves, Knowledge/Understanding, Preoccupation, Respect, Sexual Desire, Trust, and Similarity*) derived from earlier research exploring prototypical characteristics of romantic love (Bretscher & Bergner, 1991; Davis & Todd, 1982; Davis, 1985; Fehr, 1988, 1993, 2006; Regan, Kocan, & Whitlock, 1998). In the FIR, in order to minimize individual differences in interpretation, each of these characteristic is defined for participants. For example, the variable CWB is defined as follows: *"In some relationships, we have a sense that each of us truly cares about the well-being of the other. We have a sense that each of us genuinely cares about, and is willing to make personal efforts when needed, to further the other's welfare and happiness. Such caring may be expressed in various ways. For example, it might be expressed as a desire to give to the partner in ways that will make him or her happy...or in wanting to help and to stand by each other when the other is hurt or ill or unhappy... or in being willing to do things to assist each other in important matters. In all of this, finally, our sense is that our partners are not just giving to get. They are not just doing all of this because there is something in it for them. Rather, they are doing it because our welfare and happiness genuinely matter to them."*

Following their reading of the definition of each relationship characteristic, participants are asked to consider a hypothetical male-female relationship between two persons, "Jack" and "Jill," who are engaged to be married, in which the specific characteristic just defined is *"basically missing,"* and to make a judgment regarding the meaning its absence would have for them personally. For example, for the variable CWB, the item reads as follows:

"CONSIDER A RELATIONSHIP IN WHICH CARE FOR THE WELL-BEING OF THE PARTNER WAS BASICALLY MISSING on the part of one or both partners. For example, suppose that JACK DID NOT CARE ABOUT JILL'S WELL-BEING. Which of the following statements would be closest to what you would think?

a. *If this were missing, I would have a hard time believing that Jack actually loved Jill.*

b. *If this were missing, I could still believe that Jack might love Jill, but I would consider the lack of care for Jill's well-being to be a **serious deficiency** in their relationship.*

c. *If this were missing, I could still believe that Jack might love Jill, but I would consider the lack of care for Jill's well-being to be a **moderately important deficiency** in their relationship*

d. *If this were missing, I could still believe that Jack might love Jill, but I would consider the lack of care for Jill's well-being to be a **minor deficiency** in their relationship*

e. *If this were missing, I could still believe that Jack loved Jill, and I would consider the lack of care for Jill's well-being as being **no***

*deficiency* at all in their relationship.”

Two versions of the FIR questionnaire were created, with items presented in a different order in each. Further, the genders of the hypothetical engaged parties were systematically varied such that, in 50% of items, the featured person was male, and in the other 50%, female.

**Rationale.** The rationale for this form of question is that, first of all, it distinguishes between whether or not the concept of romantic love is essentialist or prototypical. Essentialist concepts, since they have necessary criteria for their employment, are subject to contradiction (e.g., “John is a bachelor, but he is married.”). Prototypical concepts, since they have no such necessary criteria, are not subject to contradiction based on the presence or absence of any feature (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Rosch, 1973). Accordingly, the selection of option “a” signifies that the participant views the concept of romantic love as an essentialist one, in which the relationship characteristic in question is seen as necessary for love of this kind. Participants are endorsing in effect the proposition that, “You can’t say that person A loves person B romantically if element X is missing from his or her relationship to B.” The endorsement of any other response option indicates that the factor in question is not viewed, in varying degrees, as essential to person A loving person B. Secondly, with regard to prototypes, if participants indicate that a given characteristic’s absence would *not* lead them to draw the extreme conclusion that person A does not love person B, but that it would constitute a “*serious deficiency*” or “*moderately important deficiency*” from his or her relationship to B, then they are viewing it as prototypical for a good romantic relationship, but not as essential to romantic love. In the bargain, they are indicating that their prototypes of romantic love relationships are different from and broader than their conceptions of what is essential to romantic love itself. We view this procedure as providing a stringent test of whether or not the absence of a characteristic was incompatible with love since 4 of the 5 options available to respondents represented rejections of that characteristic as essential.

**Demographic data.** In addition to the FIR scale, participants were given a brief 20-item survey sheet calling for them to provide demographic information regarding such things as their age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, and current relationship status.

## Procedures

Participants were brought in groups of approximately 6 to 8 to an experimental room. All were first provided with a written statement of their rights as participants, informed that all of their responses were anonymous, and told that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were then given a packet containing the FIR scale and the demographic survey, and asked to complete them. Upon completion, all participants were provided with a debriefing statement regarding the significance of the study.

## Results

Table 1 lists the 14 variables investigated in Study 1 in descending order from those most widely endorsed as essential to those least widely endorsed on the basis of the percentage of Ss who viewed each characteristic as essential; i.e., who judged the absence of the relationship characteristic at issue as grounds for endorsing the option that person A did not love person B.

The test of which characteristics are deemed to be essential was accomplished with a non-parametrical  $X^2$  in which alternative *a*, the judgment that person A did not love person B, was compared with the 4 other categorically different alternatives, all of which indicated the judgment that person A could still love person B if the characteristic at issue was missing from their relationship. In Table 1, column 2 lists the overall group means, while column 3 lists the percentage of participants who rated each variable essential to love, as well as the Chi-square figures for this variable. As can be seen in the table, *Care for the Partner's Well-being* emerged as the characteristic most widely endorsed as essential on both a percentage (77%;  $X^2 = 29.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and group mean (1.31) basis. Also emerging as essential were three further characteristics, *Enjoyment* (69%;  $X^2 = 14.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 1.34$ ), *Commitment* (66%;  $X^2 = 10.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 1.43$ ), and *Exclusiveness* (62%;  $X^2 = 5.76$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = 1.46$ ).

**Table 1: Group Means and % Rating Essential (Study 1)**

Characteristic	Mean % Rating		$X^2$	
		Essential		
Care for Partner's Well-being	1.31	77	29.16	( $p < .001$ )
Enjoyment	1.34	69	14.44	( $p < .001$ )
Commitment	1.43	66	10.24	( $p < .001$ )
Exclusiveness	1.46	62	5.76	( $p < .05$ )
Acceptance	1.51	58	2.56	( $p = .11$ )
Affectionate Feeling	1.52	59	3.24	( $p = .07$ )
Respect	1.62	47		
Trust	1.83	22		
Emotional Intimacy	2.11	14		
Freedom to Be Ourselves	2.13	19		
Knowledge/Understanding	2.16	21		
Sexual Desire	2.43	13		
Preoccupation	3.06	9		
Similarity	3.30	2		

N = 100

In this sample, 97 out of 100 (97%) participants rated at least one variable essential to love. Since seeing something as essential to a concept indicates, ipso

facto, that one holds an essentialist view of that concept, this means that 97% of our participants held an essentialist view of love.

In addition to the four characteristics rated essential, the following characteristics yielded group means between 1.5 and 2.5, indicating that participants, on average, regarded their absence as “serious deficiencies” in their models of good romantic relationships: *Acceptance*, *Affectionate Feeling*, *Respect*, *Trust*, *Emotional Intimacy*, *Freedom to be Oneself in the Relationship*, *Understanding*, and *Sexual Desire*. The absence of *Preoccupation* and *Similarity* were regarded by participants as “moderately important deficiencies” in these personal models. Thus, as predicted, participants’ models or prototypes of romantic love relationships were different from, and broader than, their conceptions of what is essential to romantic love itself.

## Study 2

Study 2 is a replication of study 1 conducted at a large southeastern state university. The measures employed, predictions made, and analyses performed were all identical. The only differences lie in the procedures used to gather data. With respect to these, participants in this study were recruited from a large undergraduate psychology class. They were asked to participate voluntarily, and if they decided to do so received extra credit for the course. A total of 108 out of a possible 144 students chose to participate. Of these, 92 were female and only 16 were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 37 years old, with a mean age of 21.01(SD=2.87). With respect to ethnicity, 87 participants were Caucasian, 14 African-American, 4 Asian, and 3 Hispanic.

**Table 2: Group Means and % Rating Essential (Study 2)**

Characteristic	Mean	% Rating Essential	X <sup>2</sup>	
Care for Partner’s Well-being	1.29	75.0	27.00	(p<.001)
Enjoyment	1.39	71.3	23.15	(p<.001)
Exclusiveness	1.40	71.3	19.59	(p<.001)
Commitment	1.54	66.0	4.59	(p<.05)
Acceptance	1.51	58.0	2.31	(p=.149)
Affectionate Feeling	1.61	55.5	1.33	(p=.248)
Respect	1.93	49.1		
Trust	1.93	15.6		
Emotional Intimacy	2.07	17.6		
Freedom to Be Ourselves	2.08	18.5		
Sexual Desire	2.23	16.7		
Knowledge/Understanding	2.35	11.1		
Preoccupation	3.05	7.4		
Similarity	3.11	1.9		

N=108

As Table 2 illustrates, results for this sample were identical to those obtained in study 1. Again, *CWB* emerged as the characteristic most widely endorsed as essential on both a percentage (75%;  $X^2=27$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and a group mean (1.29) basis. Also emerging as essential once again were *Enjoyment* (71.3%;  $X^2=23.15$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M=1.39$ ), *Exclusiveness* (71.3%;  $X^2=19.59$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M=1.40$ ), and *Commitment* (66%;  $X^2=4.59$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $M=1.54$ ). In study 2, 107 out of 108 (99.1%) participants rated at least one relationship characteristic as essential to love, again indicating that an extremely high percentage of participants held an essentialist view of this concept.

In addition to the four characteristics rated essential, the following characteristics yielded group means between 1.5 and 2.5, indicating that participants, on average, regarded their absence as “serious deficiencies” in their models of good romantic relationships: *Acceptance*, *Affectionate Feeling*, *Respect*, *Trust*, *Emotional Intimacy*, *Freedom to be Oneself in the Relationship*, *Sexual Desire*, and *Knowledge/Understanding*. The absences of *Preoccupation* and *Similarity* were regarded by participants as “moderately important deficiencies” in these personal models. Thus, as in Study 1, participants’ models or prototypes of romantic love relationships emerged as different from, and broader than, their conceptions of what is essential to romantic love itself.

### Study 3

#### Participants

Study 3 was performed at the same midwestern university as Study 1. The sample for this study, again solicited by means of a Psychology Department sign-up board, was comprised of 55 females and 53 males. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 years, with a mean age of 20.3 ( $SD = 3.99$ ). The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian (78.7%), followed by African-American (13%), Hispanic (7.4%), and Asian-American (0.9%).

For study 3, participants took two different measures. Entitled “*Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 1*” and “*Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 2*,” both were very similar to the measure employed in studies 1 and 2. For *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 1*, participants were again informed in the introduction that “*This questionnaire is designed to get at your idea of what you think should be present in a good romantic love relationship.*” Then, as in the previous studies, each item began by designating a relationship characteristic such as *Trust* or *Acceptance*, and then defining it. Following their reading of this definition, participants were called upon to respond to queries of the following form:

Consider a relationship in which *X* (e.g., *trust*) was **missing** on the part of one or both partners. For example, **suppose that Jill did not trust Jack.**

1. When you consider your idea of what a good romantic love relationship should be, how serious a **deficiency** would you consider such a **lack of trust** to be?

- a. not a deficiency at all
- b. a small deficiency
- c. a moderate deficiency
- d. a fairly serious deficiency
- e. a very serious deficiency

For *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 2*, participants were first oriented toward the notion of questions about *contradiction* with the preamble: "After each statement below, please rate the degree to which you think the statement is *contradictory*. For example, most people would probably find it contradictory, in the sense of a contradiction in terms, to say, 'Jack loves Jill, but he hates her.' In contrast, most would probably not find it contradictory to say, 'Jack loves Jill, but he sometimes gets irritated with her because she tends to be late.'" Following this instruction, a series of items of the following form were presented to participants:

Consider a relationship in which X (e.g., trust) was missing on the part of one or both partners. For example, suppose that, in the relationship between our *young engaged couple*, **Jill did not trust Jack. To what degree would you find it contradictory to say the following?**

9. "Jill loves Jack, but she does not trust him."

- a. Very contradictory
- b. Somewhat contradictory
- c. Neither contradictory nor non-contradictory
- d. Somewhat non-contradictory
- e. Not contradictory at all

**Rationale.** The first measure, *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 1*, is intended to provide information only about participants' prototypes of a good romantic relationship. All items are designed only to capture the degree to which participants would consider the absence of different relationship characteristics to represent important deficiencies from their personal models of a good romantic love relationship. Nothing in this measure pertains to essentiality, thereby affording an additional contrast between participants' conceptions of romantic love itself and of romantic relationships.

*Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 2* requires participants to review the same 14 relationship characteristics, but now to answer a different question about each of them. This question represents an alternative way (from studies 1 and 2) to establish whether or not a concept is essentialist. As noted previously, essentialist concepts, since they have universal and necessary conditions for their employment, can generate contradictory propositions. Prototypical concepts, since they have no such necessary conditions, are not subject to contradiction based on the presence or absence of any feature (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Rosch, 1973). Endorsement of option *a* in Part 2 would therefore indicate that the participant regarded the relationship characteristic at issue as essential to love. Again, as in studies 1 and 2, we view this procedure as providing a stringent test of whether or not the absence

of a characteristic was incompatible with love since 4 of the 5 options available to respondents represented rejections of that characteristic as essential.

Thus, Part 1 yields a prototype, while Part 2 yields a picture of what, if anything, is held to be essential to romantic love. Any mismatch between the two is ipso facto a difference between participants' prototypes of a good romantic relationship and their conceptions of what is essential to romantic love itself.

## Procedures

The procedures employed in study 3 were identical to those in study 1, except for the following. Two questionnaires, rather than one, were administered to each participant. Further, the demographic survey was administered between these two questionnaires in order to reduce the likelihood that participants would remember their responses from the first questionnaire while they were taking the second one.

## Results

Table 3 lists results from *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 1*, ranked according to the percentage of participants who saw the absence of the relationship feature at issue as a serious deficiency from their prototype of a good romantic relationship.

**Table 3: Group Means and % Rating as Deficiency (Study 3):**

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>% Endorsing Very Serious Def</u>	<u>% Endorsing Very + Fairly Serious</u>
Trust	1.29	76.9	97.2
Enjoyment	1.32	71.3	97.2
Care for Partner's Well-Being	1.40	64.8	95.4
Exclusiveness	1.59	63.9	81.5
Respect	1.52	58.3	89.8
Freedom to be Ourselves	1.69	48.1	87.0
Affectionate Feeling	1.70	40.7	88.9
Commitment	1.81	47.2	76.9
Acceptance	1.84	37.0	80.6
Sexual Desire	2.06	24.1	76.9
Emotional Intimacy	2.15	24.1	71.3
Knowledge/ Understanding	2.26	16.8	66.4
Preoccupation	3.02	3.7	26.9
Similarity	3.04	7.4	25.0

N=107

As noted above, this measure inquires only about participants' prototypes of a good romantic relationship. On this scale, endorsement of the two extreme categories would indicate that participants viewed the absence of some characteristic as "a very serious deficiency" or a "fairly serious deficiency" from their models of what a good romantic relationship should embody. Reversing the scores here to make them compatible with others in these studies (i.e., 5 becomes 1, etc.), any group mean between 1.0 and 1.5 would indicate that participants on average viewed a characteristic's absence as a "very serious" deficiency in a romantic relationship. Three characteristics were rated in this interval: *Trust* ( $M=1.29$ ), *Enjoyment* (1.32), and *CWB* (1.40). Rated as "fairly serious deficiencies" (i.e., yielding group means between 1.5 and 2.5) were absences of *Respect* (1.52), *Exclusiveness* (1.59), *Freedom to be Oneself in the Relationship* (1.69), *Affectionate Feeling* (1.70), *Commitment* (1.81), *Acceptance* (1.84), *Sexual Desire* (2.06), *Emotional Intimacy* (2.15), and *Knowledge/ Understanding* (2.26). Rated as "moderate deficiencies" were absences of *Preoccupation* (3.02) and *Similarity* (3.04). These data suggest, then, that 12 of the 14 relationship characteristics examined represent, in varying degrees, important elements in participants' prototypes of romantic relationships. Since the variables under consideration were selected on the basis of their centrality in previous studies of prototypical conceptions of romantic love, these findings are consistent with that extensive literature.

**Table 4: Group Means and % Rating Essential (Study 3)**

Characteristic	Mean	Percent Very		Percent Very + Somewhat Contradictory
		Contradictory	X <sup>2</sup>	
Care for Partner's Well-Being	1.35	76.9	31.15 (p<.001)	96.3
Exclusiveness	1.58	69.4	16.33 (p<.001)	85.2
Enjoyment	1.47	66.7	12.00 (p<.001)	90.7
Affectionate Feeling	1.57	63.8	8.33 (p<.001)	88.9
Respect	1.56	57.4	2.70 (p=.10)	91.7
Freedom/Ourselves	1.74	54.6		82.4
Acceptance	1.73	50.0		86.4
Commitment	1.88	42.6		91.7
Trust	2.14	33.3		68.5
Knowledge/ Understanding	2.19	25.0		68.5
Emotional Intimacy	2.27	24.1		72.2
Sexual Desire	2.33	28.7		66.7
Preoccupation	2.93	3.7		38.9
Similarity	3.15	3.7		29.6

N = 108

Table 4 lists results from *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 2*, ranked by percentage of participants who viewed each characteristic as essential (i.e., who judged the statement, “A loves B, but characteristic X is missing from A’s relationship to B” to be “*very contradictory*”).

In Study 3, *CWB* achieved the highest levels of endorsement with respect to its essentialness to love, with 76.9% ( $X^2=31.15$ ,  $p<.001$ ) of participants endorsing the proposition that to say that Jack (Jill) loves Jill (Jack), but that he is not invested in her well-being, is a contradiction in terms (96.3% rated it either “very” or “somewhat” contradictory). Also viewed as essential were *Exclusiveness* (69.4%;  $X^2=16.33$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M = 1.58$ ), *Enjoyment* (66.7%;  $X^2=12.00$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M = 1.47$ ), and *Affectionate Feeling* (63.8%;  $X^2=31.15$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $M = 1.57$ ). Three of these 4 characteristics *CWB*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Enjoyment*, were identical to those most widely viewed as essential in studies 1 and 2. The single difference from those studies was that *Affectionate Feeling*, rather than *Commitment*, emerged as the fourth characteristic achieving significance.

As in studies 1 and 2, participants’ models or prototypes of romantic love relationships, comprising 12 characteristics, emerged here as different from, and broader than, their conceptions of what is essential to romantic love itself, which comprised only 4. In this sample, 103 out of 108 participants (95.4%) rated at least one variable as essential to love, again supporting the hypothesis that people employ this concept in an essentialist way.

## Study 4

Study 4 is a replication of study 3 performed at the same large southeastern state university as study 2. The measures employed, predictions made, and analyses done were all identical. The single difference was in the procedures used to gather data. In this study, participants were recruited from two different undergraduate social psychology classes. They were asked to participate voluntarily, and 74 out of a possible 88 students elected to do so. With respect to gender, 50 females and 24 males participated, ranging in age from 18 to 38 years old, with a mean age of 22.3 ( $SD=6.19$ ). The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian (64%), followed by African-American (23%), Hispanic/Latino (3%), Asian-American (3%), and “other” (8%).

## Results

Table 5 lists results from *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 1*, ranked according to the percentage of participants who saw the absence of the relationship feature at issue as a serious deficiency from their prototype of a good romantic relationship.

In Study 4, 7 characteristics yielded group means between 1.0 and 1.5, indicating that participants on average viewed their absence as “very serious” deficiencies from their prototypes of a good romantic relationship. These were *Trust* ( $M=1.18$ ), *CWB* (1.27), *Exclusiveness* (1.30), *Respect* (1.31), *Enjoyment* (1.34),

*Commitment* (1.46), and *Acceptance* (1.49). Rated as “fairly serious deficiencies” (group means between 1.5 and 2.5) were absences of *Freedom to be Oneself in the Relationship* (1.54), *Affectionate Feeling* (1.65), *Emotional Intimacy* (1.85), *Knowledge/ Understanding* (2.24), and *Preoccupation* (2.22). Rated as a “moderate deficiency” was the absence only of *Similarity* (2.81). These data suggest, then, that 13 of the 14 relationship characteristics examined represent, in varying degrees, important elements in participants’ prototypes of romantic relationships.

**Table 5: Group Means and % Rating as Deficiency (Study 4):**

Characteristic	Mean	% Endorsing	
		Very Serious Def	Very+Fairly Serious
Trust	1.18	73.0	98.7
Care for Partner's Well-being	1.27	78.4	93.2
Exclusiveness	1.30	76.7	96.7
Respect	1.31	66.2	93.2
Enjoyment	1.34	72.9	93.2
Commitment	1.46	62.2	83.9
Acceptance	1.49	55.4	95.9
Freedom/ourselves	1.54	56.9	91.9
Affectionate feelings	1.65	51.4	86.5
Emotional Intimacy	1.85	40.5	78.4
Sexual Desire	1.91	41.2	73.3
Preoccupation	2.22	1.4	16.2
Understanding	2.24	10.8	68.9
Similarity	2.81	10.8	32.4

Note.  $N = 74$

Table 6 lists results from *Personal Meanings of Romantic Love, Part 2*, ranked by percentage of participants who viewed each characteristic as essential (i.e., who judged the statement, “A loves B, but characteristic X is missing from A’s relationship to B” to be “very contradictory”).

In Study 4, CWB achieved the highest levels of endorsement with respect to its essentialness to love, with 84.9% ( $X^2=35.63$ ,  $p<.001$ ) of participants endorsing the proposition that to say that Jack (Jill) loves Jill (Jack), but that he is not invested in her well-being, is a contradiction in terms (98.6% rated it either “very” or “somewhat” contradictory). Also viewed to a significant degree as essential were *Exclusiveness* (72.9%;  $X^2=14.22$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M = 1.59$ ), *Affectionate Feeling* (65.6%;  $X^2=7.25$ ,  $p<.01$ ;  $M = 1.45$ ), and *Enjoyment* (63.8%;  $X^2=4.95$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $M = 1.48$ ). Three of these 4 characteristics, CWB, *Exclusiveness*, and *Enjoyment*, were identical to those most widely viewed as essential in studies 1, 2, and 3. Again, as in Study 3, *Affectionate*

*Feeling*, rather than *Commitment*, emerged as the fourth characteristic achieving significance.

**Table 6: Group Means and % Rating Essential (Study 4)**

Characteristic	Mean	Percent Very		X <sup>2</sup>	Somewhat Contradictory
		Contradictory	+		
Care for Partner's Well-Being	1.16	84.9	35.63 (p<.001)		98.6
Exclusiveness	1.59	71.2	14.22 (p<.001)		80.8
Affectionate Feeling	1.45	65.6	7.25 (p<.01)		93.2
Enjoyment	1.48	63.8	4.95 (p<.05)		91.8
Acceptance	1.45	60.3	3.08 (p=.08)		94.5
Respect	1.64	52.1	0.12		89.0
Freedom/Ourselves	1.70	54.8	0.67		84.9
Commitment	1.85	45.2			83.6
Emotional Intimacy	1.99	27.4			79.5
Trust	2.14	32.9			84.9
Sexual Desire	2.32	24.7			64.4
Knowledge/Understanding	2.58	17.8			64.4
Preoccupation	3.03	8.2			31.5
Similarity	3.10	8.2			37.0

N =73 (One participant failed to complete the contradictariness ratings)

As in all 3 previous studies, participants' models or prototypes of romantic love relationships, comprising 13 characteristics, emerged here as different from, and broader than, their conceptions of what is essential to romantic love itself, which included only 4. In this sample, finally, 74 out of 74 participants (100%) rated at least one variable as essential to love, again supporting their assumption of an essentialist view of love.

### Male-Female Differences in the 4 Studies

Some previous research has indicated that women have higher standards than men in matters of mate selection (Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999). To determine if this difference applied to the specific question of what they considered to be essential to love, we ran Chi-square analyses for men and women in all 4 studies for all 14 relationship characteristics. In 48 of these 56 separate analyses, no male-female differences were obtained. The differences that were forthcoming were the following. More women than men thought that the following relationship characteristics were essential to love: *Understanding* (Study 2,  $X^2 = 6.358$ ,  $p = .012$ ; Study 4,  $X^2 = 3.913$ ,  $p = .048$ ); *Acceptance* (Study 2,  $X^2 = 7.245$ ,  $p = .007$ ; Study 4,  $X^2 = 5.140$ ,  $p = .023$ ); *Exclusiveness* (Study 2,  $X^2 = 8.087$ ,  $p = .004$ ); and *Enjoyment*

(Study 2;  $X^2 = 6.687$ ,  $p = .01$ ). There was no relationship characteristic that men endorsed as essential more widely than women. Thus, in the matter of what is considered essential to love, there is some weak support for the thesis that women are more demanding in their criteria than men. However, the preponderance of evidence from these 4 studies suggests that men and women in the American culture differ little in the matter of what they consider to be essential to love. Finally, with respect to the variable of central interest in this research, *Care for the Partner's Well-being*, no significant gender differences were obtained.

## Discussion

Overall, these studies provide strong and consistent evidence that undergraduates at two different large state universities hold an essentialist view of romantic love. In all 4 studies, when certain characteristics were described as absent from a relationship, a significant percentage of participants (a) judged that person A did not love person B (studies 1 and 2), or (b) found it contradictory to assert that person A loved person B (studies 3 and 4). The fact that two different methods of assessment were used to assess participants' judgments of essential characteristics adds support to the finding. Over all 4 studies, a total of 381 out of 390 participants (97.7%) rendered the judgment that one or more relationship characteristics was essential to love, thus indicating their subscription to an essentialist view of that concept.

The characteristic most widely and consistently endorsed as essential to romantic love was *CWB*. In the 4 studies, no fewer than 75% and as many as 84.9% of participants endorsed this characteristic as essential. Thus, what we have termed "*Care for the Partner's Well-being*," what Margaret Clark and her associates have termed "communal responsiveness" (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Monin, 2006), and what both Singer (1984) and Rempel and Burrell (2005) regard as the essence of love, here receives strong early support as *the* factor most widely viewed as essential to romantic love. Also receiving consistent wide support as essential to romantic love were the relationship characteristics *Enjoyment* and *Exclusiveness*, both of which were endorsed as such by participants in all 4 studies. Receiving lesser degrees of support were *Commitment* and *Affectionate Feeling*, both of which were found to be significant in 2 of the 4 studies.

As anticipated, participants' conception of a *good romantic relationship* emerges as different from and broader than their concept of romantic love itself, and fits the prototypical analyses previously reported by ourselves and others (Aron et al., 2006; Bergner, 2000; Davis, 1985; Fehr, 1988, 1993, 2006; Regan et al., 1998). If one counts as constitutive of such prototypes those characteristics whose absences were judged to be "very serious," "serious," or "fairly serious" deficiencies from a romantic love relationship, in no study did fewer than 12 of the 14 possible characteristics emerge as prototypical elements in participants' models of such relationships. This stands in sharp contrast to the total of 4 characteristics regarded as essential to romantic love itself in each of the 4 studies.

## Is CWB Multidimensional?

The question might be raised as to whether the concept of *CWB* is multidimensional. In considering this, it is instructive to consider two contrasting analyses. First, in Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, his *Intimacy* factor contains the subfactors trust, intimate disclosure, understanding, and feelings of closeness, warmth, and comfort (Sternberg, 1988; 2006). These are conceptually distinct relational features placed into one factor on the basis that they tend empirically to covary, thus rendering Sternberg's concept of *Intimacy* multidimensional. In contrast, consider an analysis that states that "Generosity is a willingness to give of oneself and one's possessions to others; it might be exemplified by such behaviors as donating to charities, volunteering for civic causes, and giving of one's time and energy to the members of one's family." Here, a definition of a single concept is given, followed by a list, not of conceptually distinct elements, but of concrete ways in which this concept might be instantiated, rendering the analysis unidimensional and not multidimensional. If one revisits our definition of *CWB* in the text, it should be clear that this definition is of the latter and not the former sort. A single concept, "*Care for the partner's well-being*," is defined and then, to concretize it for participants, several examples are provided of how this concept might be instantiated in actual relationships.

## Necessary and Sufficient?

Traditionally, formal definitions have been held to be specifications of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct employment of a concept (Osorio, 2006). In the present four studies, the preponderance of evidence suggests that people view certain features as *necessary* for them to judge that a given relationship is an instance of the concept of romantic love. What is not clear is whether or not this research has established *sufficient* conditions. Might there be other characteristics that we did not think of that might have proven essential for romantic love? This possibility should and will be a matter of scrutiny in our future research on this topic. However, this lack of finality regarding sufficiency should not obscure the conclusion that, once one has established the presence of necessary conditions, one has ipso facto shown that a concept is not prototypical in character. Prototypical concepts, per Rosch (1973; Mervis & Rosch, 1981), are by definition concepts *without necessary conditions*.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Important limitations of the present research, all of which we intend to address in future work, are the following. First, as just noted, while our findings lend support to a certain set of characteristics being regarded as necessary for romantic love, they do not establish sufficiency. Thus, consideration of further characteristics is currently needed. Second, our samples were restricted to college students at two large American state universities. As such, they consisted heavily of persons who were (a) young, (b) relatively limited in life experience, (c) primarily Caucasian, (d) socialized in a single Western culture, and (e) relatively successful and advantaged in life. In the future, we plan to explore the generality of our findings

to a sample of individuals who are older, more relationally experienced, and more demographically and culturally diverse. Underscoring this last element of cultural diversity, an especially important need is that of replicating the present research in different cultural settings (e.g., Asian or Middle Eastern ones) where conceptions of love as having essential characteristics, as well as what these might be, may be quite different.

## Conclusion

The portrait of romantic love suggested by our findings, one that we hope will stimulate further research into these matters by others, is the following: First, the concept of romantic love may be, contrary to what we and others have previously maintained, a definable, essentialist one. Second, *Care for the Partner's Well-being* may be the single characteristic most widely perceived as essential to such love, closely followed by *Exclusiveness* and *Enjoyment*, and possibly *Commitment* and *Affectionate Feeling*. Third and finally, beyond their possible employment of romantic love as an essentialist concept, people may possess related, but different and broader models or prototypes of what good romantic relationships would ideally embody.

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## Appendix A: Definitions on FIR Questionnaire

**Acceptance:** In some relationships, we have the sense that we are *accepted by the other as the person we are*. Even though our partner may at times object to certain things we do (e.g., to our smoking or driving too fast or being late), we do not get the sense that they want us to be *different persons*. Rather, our sense in the relationship is that we are basically accepted as the person we are.

**Trust:** In some relationships, we have a basic sense that we can *trust* each other--that we can count on each other not to betray us or to violate the relationship that we have. We confidently believe, for example, that our partners will not be sexually unfaithful, or lie about important matters, or reveal sensitive information about us to others, or use or take advantage of us.

**Knowledge/Understanding:** In some relationships, we really *know* each other--really *understand* each other--to a high degree. In other words, each of us knows things about the other such as his or her deepest values, most cherished goals in life, strengths, weaknesses, sensitivities, and interests. As a rule, this knowledge means that we will understand the reasoning and the feelings that are behind each other's actions, and will not be puzzled or confused by them. If the other is troubled or moody, for example, we are likely to be able to make a good guess as to what is bothering them. We know what "makes each other tick."

**Care for Partner's Well-being:** In some relationships, we have a sense that each of us *truly cares about the well-being of the other*. We have a sense that each of us genuinely cares about – and is willing to make personal efforts when needed – to further the other's welfare and happiness. Such caring may be expressed in various ways. For example, it might be expressed in a desire to *give* to the partner in ways that will make him or her happy...or in wanting to help and to stand by each other when the other is hurt or ill or unhappy... or in being willing to do things to assist each other in important matters. In all of this, finally, our sense is that our partners are *not just giving to get* – they are not just doing all of this because there is something in it for them – but rather because our happiness and welfare genuinely matter to them.

**Respect:** In some relationships, we have the sense that each of us *respects* the other. In other words, we consider each other to be persons who are worthy of esteem and high regard. This respect might be based on a variety of factors. We might, for example, respect each other as caring persons, as morally good persons, as intelligent persons, as capable persons, or for some combination of these quali-

ties. Whatever the particular reasons might be, however, we find that each of us has a basic respect for each other.

**Exclusiveness:** In some relationships, we regard each other as our “one and only.” We have a sense that we want to have this kind of a special relationship *only* with each other. We wish to form a sort of “two person community” in which no one else is allowed in in just the way that our romantic partner is. While we may continue our friendships just as before, there is a specialness to the relationship with our romantic partner which is unique to it and reserved for it only.

**Preoccupation:** In some relationships, we find ourselves *preoccupied* with each other. That is, we find ourselves thinking about each other a great deal of the time. The other is on our mind a lot, perhaps even at times when we should be thinking about other things.

**Sexual Desire:** In some relationships, there are strong *feelings of sexual desire* for each other. Whether the partners actually become sexually intimate or whether they do not, there is a strong *desire* to touch and to be touched, to hold each other, and to engage in sexual intercourse.

**Emotional Intimacy:** In some relationships, we *confide intimately* in each other. We share with each other what is going on in our lives. We disclose intimate personal experiences and feelings, both positive and negative, to each other. We feel we can “really talk to each other,” really “open up” to each other about deeply personal matters. Essentially, we include each other in our intimate worlds.

**Enjoyment:** In some relationships, partners *enjoy* each other. They enjoy being together--enjoy being in each other’s company. Even though there may be times of conflict, of boredom, or of tension in the relationship, for the most part the experience of being with each other is an enjoyable one.

**Commitment:** In some relationships, partners are *committed* to each other. They have a deep and abiding sense that they wish to be with each other for a very long time and even forever. They experience a sense of personal willingness and desire to fulfill the traditional marital vow to remain together and to stand by each other “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health... ‘til death do us part.”

**Freedom to Be Ourselves:** In some relationships, we *feel free to be ourselves* with our partners. We do not feel like we have to play any kind of false role with them, or hold back from being the way we really are. We feel like we can just relax and be the person who we really are when we are with our partner.

**Similarity:** In some relationships, we find that we are *similar* to our partners in many ways. For example, we might find that we want similar things out of life, that we have similar values, that we have many common interests, or that we tend to enjoy the same things.

**Affectionate Feeling:** In some relationships, partners have strong *feelings of affection* for each other. They experience strong emotions of warmth, of fondness, and of liking toward each other.