Love Narratives

How Young Adult Couples Construct Their Ideas of Love and What Dominant Voices Influence Them

Clara Marie Campbell

Institute of Family-Therapy Malta

July 2023

This dissertation is presented in

partial fulfilment of the

Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy

at the Institute of Family Therapy - Malta

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr Charles Azzopardi for his sterling guidance, patience and encouragement, as well as for his genuine interest in my work. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their backing and support. Lastly, I would like to show my appreciation to my fiancé Karl for his consistent love, reassurance and presence throughout the whole journey.

Dedication

To all young adults in search of a loving partner to embark on a journey of re-discovering, building and co-constructing a loving romantic relationship.

Abstract

Love remains a concept that requires constant revisiting due to its evolvable nature and relationship with culture (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). This study explores love narratives that young adult courting couples develop throughout their romantic relationships. A narrative analysis will be used to analyse data collected through 6 semi-structured interviews with 6 dating couples. Dominant discourses that emerged include the relevance of the voice of the family of origin and the value placed on presence and absence within the young couples' relationships. Other less popular themes affecting their constructs of love include inflation and messages from society and those around them. The collective findings will offer a fresh lens into the understanding of love within contemporary couple relationships as well as launch a public conversation on the topic among the Maltese.

Keywords: love - young adult couples - narrative analysis

Contents

Acknowledgements **3**
Dedication **4**
Abstract **5**
Contents **6**
Chapter 1 - Introduction **8**
Preamble 8
Research Question 9
The Rationale for the Study and Self-reflexivity 9
Narrative Theory as a Conceptual Framework 11
Dissertation Overview 12
Chapter 2 - Literature Review **13**
Love 13
Sternberg's Theory of Love 13
Chapman's Theory of Love 14
Attachment Theory 15
Influences on Love 16
Chapter 3 - Methodology **18**
Methodology 18
Hermeneutics 19
Categorical Narrative Analysis 19
Method 20
Research Sample 20
Data Collection 22
Data Analysis 22
Table 1 Suggested Sequential Readings 23
Methodological Integrity 23
Chapter 4 - Findings **25**
Table 2 Participant Details 25
First Reading: Initial Thematic Content and Overall Structure 25
Table 3 First Reading Findings 26
Families of Origin 26
Effort Required 27
Concepts of We-ness 27

Seeing Love in the Mundane Everyday Tasks 27
The Future Security of Their Love 28
Inflation 28
Second Reading: Voices and Discourses 29
Table 4 Second Reading Findings 30
Families of Origin and Being Present 30
Voices of the Media 32
Voices of Religion/Church 32
The Voice of Theory 33
Individualism, the Feminist Voice, Gender-Related Discourse and Caution about Love 33
Time - Messages from society regarding the length of relationships 34
Third Reading: Patterns 35
Chapter 5 - Discussion **37**
Fourth Reading: Links with Theory 37
The Five Love Languages 37
Referring to Gottman's theories about friendship and arguing 38
We-ness 39
Parents' Influences 39
The Media Influence 41
Fifth Reading - Uniting the Narratives 42
Finances and Inflation 42
Sexual Intimacy and the Lack Thereof 43
Self-reflexivity 44
Chapter 6 - Conclusion **45**
Limitations and Recommendations 46
References **47**
Appendices **53**
Appendix A Information Sheet and Consent Form 53
Appendix B Interview Guide 56

Chapter 1 - Introduction

"Typically, each of us has multiple stories about love, not just one, These stories underscore the fact that not only is love not quite the same thing for different people, but it is not even one simple thing for us individually"

Robert J. Sternberg

Preamble

Love is a phenomenon that has been of interest to social scientists, writers, poets and philosophers alike. Brehm (1985) attests that "Social scientists have had as much trouble defining love as philosophers and poets. We have books on love, theories on love, and research on love. Yet no one has a single, simple definition that is widely accepted by other social scientists" (as cited in Fehr & Russel, 1991, p. 427).

The social constructionist view of 'love', is that it is defined and experienced differently according to context (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). Such context is vital to support the ever-evolving concept directly affected by variables such as time, culture, space, and age among many others. As a result, periodic studies about love are essential to keep up with the constantly changing society and to keep the clinical experience relevant, fresh and up to date with the moment's trends and perceptions.

As opposed to past generations' marriages of convenience, in a study carried out in Malta in 2016, love was indeed mentioned as one of several relational qualities prominent in a couple's relationship (Abela et al., 2020). Young adult Maltese couples within the local context will, inevitably, bring their own definitions and experiences to their relationships. With particular

attention to the need for further research in the area of courtship in Malta (Azzopardi, 2007); I propose this study to be carried out with young adult couples to capture the contemporary relational mindsets with regard to love and the foundations of the current relationships and prospective future families.

Research Question

This dissertation will venture to understand the love narratives of local young adult couples. Therefore, the research questions guiding the information gathering are the following:

- How do young adult couples construct and understand love within their romantic relationship?
- What factors and sources had a significant impact on shaping the participants' understanding of love?

The aim of this study is to understand the contemporary understanding of young adults' perspectives and experiences of love within their romantic relationships. Additionally, the study will examine the influential factors and sources that shape the participants' conception of love and how they carry it on to their respective romantic relationships.

The Rationale for the Study and Self-reflexivity

As my views and experiences of love started evolving in my romantic relationship, I became interested to know whether this was a process that other young adults were going through as well. Moreover, whether they were sharing this change as a couple or whether it was an unconscious shift in either partner that would inadvertently influence the course of the relationship and the other partner.

Further to this interest, I am curious about what informs ideas about love carried and experienced within the young adult couple. That is to sayfrom where or whom the individuals in the couple learned how to be a couple from and how this influences their lived experience of their couple relationship.

These interests stemmed naturally from my own process of discovering what love is in practice whilst journeying through my current 11-year relationship with my fiancé. My inspiration for love and couplehood had always been classic romantic novels such as those by Barbra Cartland. These novels and other love-genre content in film or television series governed my early teenage years' free time and fantasies. My romantic expectations were set on the basis of grand gestures, perfect stories, love at first sight and effortless happily ever afters.

Before I set off on this research journey, I discussed my interests with my peer group and asked around for their views about love and how it features in their romantic relationships. The majority's immediate reaction was that it was something normal and that it came naturally for the couple. By this, they elaborated that they never really discussed love in such detail as a couple. However, they mentioned certain relationship milestones, such as: travelling, cohabitating, buying property, getting married or having children, as good indicators of a loving relationship. This commitment resonates with Sternberg's (1986) theory about love, but surely there must be more to the discussion in practice. I, also, do not recollect having discussions about love with my partner up until a good few years into the relationship; which was supported and motivated by the new relational concepts I was becoming exposed to in my academic journey. Our conversation started with Chapman's (2004) love language test which gave us a new perspective on our relationship and understanding of each other and led to further discussions and discoveries accordingly. It is quite interesting therefore to research what other young couples are bringing into their relationships and to start such an important conversation about the meaning and recognition of love. Despite this not being a generalisable study, such an

immortal and cultural phenomenon is worth studying also for clinical purposes to remain relevant.

Professionally, I am intrigued to unearth the co-constructing process of defining, re-discovering and experiencing love in a young adult couple. Moreover, I would like to bring such conversations about love and each partner's understanding of it to the forefront. From my own and my peers' experiences, love was a topic we took for granted and never discussed. Since my knowledge and perspectives started to shift upon coming across the theoretical backbone behind systemic psychotherapy, which led me to reflect deeper into my relationship's foundations; I question whether other young adult couples have similar stories; and how these can be helpful and therapeutic to reflect upon.

To assume that romantic partners are aware of their emotions and are perfectly in control of how they regulate them and affect those around them is foolish (Duck, 1980). Very often, partners are not aware of their effect on their counterparts, which reinforces the need to evaluate the co-construction of the love between a couple. The use of narrative theory will elicit an understanding of how people perceive and make sense of the world around them (Rowen, 2018).

Narrative Theory as a Conceptual Framework

This thesis is positioned within the interpretive paradigm, indicating that it is based on particular beliefs about the nature of reality, how we acquire knowledge and the methods we use. As an interpretive researcher, these beliefs include the acknowledgement of multiple realities, the collaborative role of the researcher and participant in creating understanding, and the acquisition of knowledge through observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Levitt et al. (2017) posit that new systems of meaning are continually emerging and therefore commitment to one or more particular interpretive stances may preclude the analytic process. By this, they infer that

reflexive practices throughout the study are sufficient and paramount to ensure the methodological integrity of the study (as cited in Josselson & Hammock, 2021).

The use of narrative theory as a conceptual framework will allow for emphasis on language and the deconstruction of the multiple discourses and voices of the couples' love narratives to come to light (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). Foucault is known to encourage rhetoric that language develops and generates meaning within specific historical and material contexts (Barker, 2008). Therefore the discourse provided by the participants will provide a snapshot in time of their constructions of love in their lived realities. The use of language here is particularly poignant. As Chomsky (2000) identifies it as an organ of the body, similar to how, circularly, an organ cannot be isolated from a body; the use of language recorded will be significant to the meanings and narratives relayed.

Dissertation Overview

In this chapter, I have outlined the background that supports and motivates the drive for this research. In the following chapters, a review of the existing literature around the research will be presented to set a theoretical context to this study. Moreover, a description of the methodology process and research method will anchor the study's findings which will be portrayed in the following chapters. These will be further discussed and linked accordingly in the subsequent and final chapter.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Love

Love has been heavily written about very differently over time and is generally influenced by culture, time period and the perceived functions of love in society at large. Several definitions and experiences have been recorded (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Mickel & Hall, 2006). Many scholars who attempted to theorise love; Rubin, Davis, Lasswell and Lobsenz and others, have researched and come up with their own respective theories of love (Sternberg, 1986). A common factor among these theories and definitions of love is the multidimensional nature of love that includes thoughts, behaviours and feelings (Beall & Sternberg, 1995).

A more relational theory is presented by Chapman (2004) and will also be further discussed in this chapter. He brings forward the idea of love languages. By nature, if language functions as a connecting bridge when used purposefully, a sender and receiver are required to participate in the interaction. By the same token, Chapman (2004) identifies multiple verbal and non-verbal languages that carry the emotion of love. Furthermore, just like most languages, he identifies dialects and the possibility of one having to learn the dialect of their partner to ensure a better connection when they tend to have different love languages. Similarly, Gottman and Gottman's (2017) theories about love, which will be referred to in later chapters, require the input, understanding, and willingness of both partners in question to co-create a common experience of love unique to their couple.

Sternberg's Theory of Love

Sternberg (1986) speaks about the triangular theory of love made up of the intimacy, passion, and commitment components. The first relates to the closeness of a relationship,

connectedness and bonding; also rephrased to appeal to what is considered the presence of warmth in that relationship. The second, passion, refers to the drives of physical attraction, the sources and motivation that lead to sexual consummation, classifying the property as the 'hotness scale' of the relationship. Lastly, commitment is more closely associated with coldness and the rational decision-making elements of a relationship. The importance of the three components of love varies and differs depending on several factors such as whether the function of the loving relationship is a short-term or long-term one. (Sternberg, 1986).

We live in a dialectical world and we have established that the construct of love is not fixed, nor is it the same for any member in a given relationship (Rober, 2005). Migerode and Hooghe's (2012) study aims to enrich such conversations about love by broadening and deepening the discussions effectively helping both therapists and the couples themselves to understand each other better, their emotions and their interactions within the context of love. The authors support the idea that each partner is loved for who they are in the relationship and this fosters growth and change. They also highlight the importance of making known the lovable uniqueness of one another and aim not to strive to change the partner. Indeed, by being empathic and respectful towards their uniqueness, they become better equipped to embrace complexity and maintain the relationship dialectic (Migerode & Hooghe, 2012).

Chapman's Theory of Love

Chapman (2004) goes a step further in this analysis by developing his theory about the five love languages. He posits that every person has a primary love language by which they feel, appreciate and try to reciprocate love. When two spouses have a different love language to each other, he advocates the need to learn more about each other's love language to be able to make the other partner feel loved. This idea of filling one's 'love tank' links with Gottman's 5:1 ratio result from his longitudinal studies of couples in the 'love lab'. He claims that every negative action is balanced by not less than 5 positive actions thus enhancing the need to stock up on the

positive deeds within the couple to be able to sustain the relationship (Grace & Meuhlhoff, 2016).

Chapman (2004) supports Gottman's love tank theory by his practical tips accompanying each individual love language. Firstly, there are what he labels as 'words of affirmation' which incorporate verbal compliments and comments of appreciation as well as encouraging statements that foster interest and empowerment. Secondly, Chapman identifies couple 'quality time' as one of the love languages wherein the respective spouse would feel loved by the partner's undivided attention. Some of the practical contributions that are highly appreciated are one's real presence whilst undertaking an activity of choice or whilst having a deep conversation sharing experiences, feelings, and thoughts, as well as actively engaging in self-reflection and self-revelation. Thirdly, Chapman mentions the 'receiving of gifts' as another love currency. These need not be expensive, ultra frequent, or materialistic. The thought and the self behind a gift can be two of the dialects that pertain to this particular language. 'Acts of service' are considered as another way to express/appreciate love. The fifth and last of the languages identified is 'physical touch' which includes any form of contact both implicit and explicit whilst varying from handholding, to kisses, to gentle brushes in passing, to sexual intercourse etc. When the right language is spoken to the respective receiver Chapman (2004) argues that the result of feeling loved in the couple relationship not only boosts and solidifies the dyad but also nurtures a sense of significance, and self-worth and secures attachment with one's spouse.

Attachment Theory

Security in a relationship is, in fact, one of the fundamental pillars in attachment theory as proposed by Bowlby in the second half of last century. He elaborates on the cyclical nature of care-giving and care-seeking in a parent-child relationship with the attachment figure providing a secure base from which the child can develop and explore at a distance (Byng-Hall, 1991). This

sense of personal security in an attachment figure transcends the parent-child relationship to an adult-adult attachment relationship (Crowell & Waters, 1994) as emotionally-focused therapists acknowledge that all humans need security and protection (Goldenberg, & Goldenberg, 2008). In fact, Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Crowell & Waters (1994) talk about the reciprocal nature of an adult-adult attachment relationship where partners tend to take both the role of caregiver (to another adult) as well as that of a support seeker from the same adult. This is in line with the attachment tie consisting of one partner's use of the other as a "secure base" in times of safety and a "safe haven" in times of distress (Crowell & Waters, 1994, p. 31).

Madey and Rodgers (2009) expand on Sternberg's triangular theory of love by linking the attachment theory to the love components of passion, commitment and intimacy and analyse the effect on relationship satisfaction. This amalgamation, aims to further unravel and understand the complexities of love. It was found that greater relationship satisfaction is predicted from a secure attachment due to the higher chance predictors of intimacy and commitment. In addition to this, such a feeling of security in a relationship allows for stronger commitment and less fear of rejection or abandonment (Madey & Rodgers, 2009) and from a systemic perspective one fosters the other.

Influences on Love

At the tender age and fluid life stage the participants of this study will be in, it would be very interesting to elicit what influences their perceptions of love. To learn what experiences or resources they tap into when constructing their own definitions of love and how they learned to identify love in their relationships. By extension, this will contribute to exploring what ideas of love they carry on to their future as individuals but also as a couple together.

The home environment and the familial adult relationship modelling within it are undoubtedly the earliest important references for individuals as they witness their closest relations' experience of love and partnership (Azzopardi, 2007; Soloski et al., 2013). Soloski

et.al's (2013) extensive review of the literature identifies several (but not exhaustive) other demographic influences on love such as race, gender, ethnicity, culture, financial security, religiosity, values, and length of courtship. They attest that for a socially constructed entity like love, it is no simple cause-and-effect formulation; rather it is a body of factors that influence and evolve over time (Soloski et al, 2013).

Another major influence on the participants of this study is perceived to be the role that the media plays in their life experiences and perceptions. We are living in an age that is bombarded by media with the easiest access rates so far. Scant research shows that romantic movies tendentially induce idealized views of romantic relationships among adolescent Belgian girls (Driesmans et al., 2016). Similarly, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that viewing television programming related to love and marriage such as romantic comedies and soap operas is highly associated with idealistic and unrealistic ideas about love, marriage and couple relationships. This is an understudied phenomenon and scholars have called for further studies on the influence of the media especially on the younger more impressionable age groups (Azzopardi, 2007; Considine, 2009; Driesmans et al, 2016).

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter provides the rationale for my choice to conduct this study from a narrative lens. It will be split into two parts: 'Methodology' and 'Method'. The former will explain what influenced me as a researcher to adopt such an approach whilst the latter will provide an overview of the tools that I used to perform the data collection, interviewing and coding processes.

Methodology

The narrative approach in psychology focuses special attention on the role of stories in human development, psychological experiences and personality (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). Taking Bruner's (2004) perspective, we live, experience and view our lives as stories. Sense through these stories is made by linking the plot events in a manner of beginning, middle and end points (Sarbin, 1986). In fact, we use these stories of ourselves to connect our actions, honour our identities and differentiate from others whilst also linking to the past, present and possibly also the future (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). Such stories shape our identities, differentiate us from others around us, and help us connect to our past, present, and future (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). This is my interest in young adults' love narratives as co-constructed within their couplehood having been influenced by their storied experiences, carried through the present and projected futures.

Epistemologically, narrative research respects the existence of multiple truths relying on the foundations of philosophers such as Dilthey, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lyotard and Wittgenstein. In line with Spence's (1982) differentiation between historical and narrative truth, this dissertation will consider narrative truth as a constructed record of experience focusing on

understanding and organising events. This is in contrast to factual accounts making up a historical truth (Wertz, 2011). Narrative inquiry relies on participants' detailed stories that unravel their own worldview and understanding of life. In adherence with the normative (but not exclusive) sourcing of narratives through encounters with the participants (Wertz, 2011),

Hermeneutics

These stories are very much dependent on the different meanings ascribed to them by the narrator themselves. To this effect, a hermeneutic approach to the data is required in order to capture the implicit and explicit meanings conveyed through the data sets (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). Hermeneutics is the "art of understanding another person's utterance correctly" in an effort to bridge one's thoughts to their communicated delivery (Schleiermacher, 1998, p5). With this said, it is not accuracy that is fundamental in the analysis but the "interpretative, constructionist epistemology" (Josselson & Hammock, 2021, p7). "As every utterance has a dual relationship, to the totality of language and to the whole thought of its originator, then all understanding also consists of the two moments, of understanding the utterance as derived from language, and as a fact in the thinker" (Schleiermacher, 1998, p8).

Categorical Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis extends itself to re-present the participants' accounts, to assume the authority to go beyond, and cautiously interpret the data in its literal and conscious meanings through organised and documented procedures (Chase, 1996; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). It involves a process of multiple read-throughs of the interview transcripts or other data processing wherein the researcher finds units of meaning in relation to the concepts and categories from other similar texts (Josselson & Hammock, 2021; Wertz, 2011). This is achieved through coding strategies and comparisons whereby the differentiation between content and

form, categorisation and contextualisation is elicited as discussed by Maxwell (1996; as cited in Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

Along this process, Schleiermacher's (1998) ' hermeneutic circle' comes into play wherein it is understood that the text as a whole informs the abstracted parts whilst the latter's meaning-making supports and elevates the global sense of the text under analysis (Campbell & Draper, 1985; Josselson & Hammock, 2021). Furthermore, scholars have broadened the understanding of narrative from a socially contextualized interactive piece of writing to a physical and socially enacted presentation. This revised interpretation emphasizes the significance of emotions, nonverbal cues, and opportunities for engaging in dialogue and fostering communal connections (Chase, 2018).

Method

In this section, I will be giving a detailed account describing the various processes relating to the research sample, data collection, analysis and methodological integrity of the dissertation.

Research Sample

I recruited six local couples aged 18-25 who have been in a relationship for a minimum of one year. The age parameter was decided following the NSO statistics (2020) of registered marriages in Malta and Gozo grouped by age for the year 2018. Statistics showed the majority of marriages see spouses within the 25-29-year-old age group. Therefore, 18 years of age, being the official adult legal age is identified as the lower age parameter of this study. Making 25 years of age the higher age parameter of the study just reaches the bottom bracket of the common marrying age group statistically ensuring that the chosen age group is mostly unmarried (NSO, 2020). In terms of recruitment, this particular age group is highly accessible through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, the recruitment call was passed on

to gatekeepers such as in charge of youth groups who passed along the proposals to the eligible candidates who in turn made contact to participate. These couples will always be referred to by their randomly assigned pseudonym to preserve confidentiality and I will be briefly introducing them here.

The first couple to reach out were Lisa and Katya who are both 19 years of age and have been together for three to five years. They are currently both full-time students reading for their Bachelor's Degrees. This relationship happens to be each other's first romantic relationship.

The second couple are Natasha and Benjamin who are 23 and 25 years old respectively. They've been together for the past 8 years and are both in full-time employment whilst Benjamin is also a part-time student in pursuit of enriching his profession. Whilst this was the first romantic relationship for Natasha, it is the second one for Benjamin.

The third couple are Rodianne and Wayde who have been together for five years. Rodianne were 21 years old and Wayde is 19 years old at the time of the interview. She's a full-time student whilst he's a business owner which he shares with his brother. This would be Rodianne's first and WAyde's second romantic relationship.

The fourth couple are Alex and Raisa who are 23 and 20 years old respectively and have been together for a year and a half. They are both students, Alex is currently reading for his Master' Degree whilst Raisia is in her final undergrad year. This is their first romantic relationship and they met at a local youth group in their home town.

The fifth couple are Jacob and Martha who are both 22 years of age, they are both full-time students whilst having part-time jobs. This is their first romantic relationship and have been together for the past six years.

The sixth and final couple are Martha and Ed they are 23 and 24 years old respectively and they've been together for the past six and a half years. Martha works full-time and is in her first year of reading for her part-time Master's Degree whilst Ed is currently working full-time. This is both their first romantic relationship.

Data Collection

Each couple was invited for an hour-long semi-structured interview that delved into their ideas about love before they started their relationship, as it stands at present and also what they make of their love in the future. Importance was given to the influences they reflect on having informed their ideas and how these influences were carried on to their relationship. Following ethical approval from the Institute of Family Therapy- Malta Ethics Board, an information sheet-consent form was presented to the participants prior to each interview, to explain the topic and remits of this study as well as their rights as participants. This document can be found for reference as Appendix A followed by the interview guide used with all the participants found as Appendix B. I video and audio recorded them on separate devices as a backup. I proceeded to transcribe these interviews verbatim and analysed them as individual text and as a collective data set.

Data Analysis

I found Josselson and Hammack's (2021) guidance for narrative analysis particularly helpful due to its clear guidance and easy-to-follow and apply the process in terms of analysing the interviews. They propose five sequential readings whilst extensively annotating the text and noting reflections at the same time. Each reading has a different analysis goal as shown in the adapted Table 1 below from Josselson and Hammack (2021).

Table 1

Suggested Sequential Readings

Reading	Goal
1	Initial thematic content and overall structure
2	Voices, discourses and master narratives
3	Patterns and unity in the narrative
4	Links between text and theory
5	Situating the narratives in relation to the other in the study.

The first reading is done whilst relistening to the audio recording with the aim to take note of the preliminary themes that are prominent in the interviews that give shape to the narrative in question. The second reading identifies all the different voices and discourses at play including those of other individuals as well as ideologies, cultural perspectives or social narratives. Hammock & Toolis (2019) recognise the dialogical development of individuals as an imperative factor in narrative analysis, hence the attention to the different voices and discourses during the process of analysis (as cited in Josselson & Hammack, 2021). The third reading pinpoints patterns and links throughout the narrative. The fourth reading links the texts to relevant theory and the fifth reading aims to compare and contrast the findings by grouping patterns, noting similarities and discrepancies and establishing links throughout the collective dataset.

Methodological Integrity

As when in therapy the self of the therapist is an essential informant and enricher of the therapist's perspective and presence (Rober, 2005), so is the case when the therapist is in the role of the researcher (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). It is often regarded that when personal experiences contain a level of familiarity to the research topic, the researcher stands in a position of privilege in interpreting the data (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Conversely,

overidentification with the participants is often criticised as problematic for the potentially unfaithful interpretations belonging more to the researcher than the participant (Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

I acknowledge that due to my closeness to the topic and research participants' most likely demographics, I am at risk of partaking in the unconscious and unintended enmeshment of thoughts, experiences and interpretations. For this reason, I understand that a rigorous reflexive process and careful documentation of how I and my positioning influence the development of the research will be fundamental for the methodological integrity of this study (Josselson & Hammock, 2021).

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter will present the findings elicited from the six interviews conducted. Following the recommended analysis procedure by Josselson and Hammack (2021), the structure of the chapter will reflect the various readings done to study the texts. The first two readings will be presented in this chapter, whilst the last three will be further developed and complement the discussion of these results in the subsequent chapter. For ease of reference, Table 2 below shows the couple-participants contributing to the ensuing results.

Table 2

Participant Details

	Couple 1	Couple 2	Couple 3	Couple 4	Couple 5	Couple 6
Names	Lisa & Katia	Natasha & Ben	Wayde & Rodianne	Alex & Raisa	Jacob & Mia	Martha & Ed
Length of relationship	3.5 years	8 years	5 years	1.5 years	6 years	6.5 years

First Reading: Initial Thematic Content and Overall Structure

The first reading was conducted whilst listening to and viewing the interviews. In the meantime, I annotated the text with the emerging themes. Given the dissertation's word limit, since some of the themes ended up being classified also as a voice within the couples' narrative such as the theme of media influence; I decided to give such themes priority as dominant voices presented as the second reading of this narrative analysis. For an initial clear representation of said themes, Table 3 below will group the themes as dominant themes common for all the couples and as secondary and more isolated themes that emerged for some of the participants.

Table 3

First Reading Findings

Dominant Themes	**Secondary Themes**
Families of Origin	Effort Required
Presence	Concepts of We-ness
	Seeing Love in the Mundane Everyday Tasks
	The Future Security of Their Love
	Inflation
	Media Influence, Gender, Religion, Time

Families of Origin

The theme of the families of origin comes out rather prominently in all the couples I interviewed, such as Alex and Raisia who both remarked that their primary source of loving experiences and models were with their respective families and parents: “A year and a half ago I had no idea of what love in a relationship would be like apart from what I used to observe mostly from my parents who have been together for around 30 years”. Similarly, Martha said she never saw her parents argue and “was under the impression that [she] would find the perfect match and all will be plain sailing.”

Interestingly, whilst all the participants drew on their parents’ experiences of love for their own romantic relations, most of them viewed them as parents and not lovers. This was particularly noticed when the love described was experienced by the participant as a child and not witnessed among the couple. Martha was one of the few who saw their couplehood and “noticed their romantic side” because they tend to be very affectionate in public as a couple such as holding hands, hugging and giving the occasional kiss without embarrassment or too much thought for who is in their company.

Effort Required

Half of the couples explained early on that their experience of a romantic relationship tells them that it is an effortful endeavour. Katia said their romantic relationship "is more high maintenance kind of love". Whilst Natasha said she views their relationship as a no-destination journey, "In my mind, it's like you row and row … each stroke is harder than the other". Similarly, her partner Ben views their relationship as "an adventure on its own". Raisa says it is constant and consistent work that never reaches an end such that "if one stops working for their love, it won't be true love".

Concepts of We-ness

Whilst a subjugated discourse of individualism was noted in some of the couples as discussed further below, the theme of we-ness could be picked up within Couples Five and Six. Martha came up with a nurturing metaphor to define love: "a space where you can think and grow…just like two plants watering each other… a safe space that allows you to grow and branch out, but through love, he's always going to be there to ground me". On a similar note, Mia explained that when in a relationship, both members will bring their own ideas individually, but over time, "the universal meaning of love develops differently for every couple uniquely".

Seeing Love in the Mundane Everyday Tasks

Unanimously, Wayde and Rodianne could only think of "the little things", which he explains are for him even a simple 'I miss you' message initiating plans to meet up. Similarly, random acts of service or spontaneous drop-bys at home are what they interpret as being loved. On a very close wavelength, Jacob feels loved by sending or receiving the first or last message of the day from Mia, by the fact that she prepares him food when he has long busy days. Likewise, Mia recounted her deepest appreciation when Jacob gifts her something she'd shown interest in months prior. This to her means "this person is actually paying attention to me and is doing her

utmost to make me happy." Alex describes this element as "comfort in knowing you're in their thoughts and they're in yours".

The Future Security of Their Love

As it happens, all the couples currently reside with their families of origin separately, which led to them speculating about their future together and how they imagine their life and love would be different once they are living together. Half the couples implied that they envision their love to be "more real" mostly for truly experiencing each other "in the good times and bad times" (- Martha). Wayde expects their love to grow and be expressed differently since they'd start being together at new points during the day. Therefore "new little things will come into play throughout this new process and strengthen the love."

Further to these visions, Lisa, Katia and Ed portrayed complete confidence in a successful future based on hurdles or experiences overcome in the couple's past. Lisa feels that they "set a good groundwork especially living together on holiday last summer for a whole month" to which Katia adds by equating their struggles of living together in hostels and logistic mishaps of missing trains to their day-to-day future struggles when living together; with the latter being less stressful and complicated due to the removed communal element. Ed believes that they've "already experienced the biggest changes since [they] started at a young age and most changes happen until age 25" which they've reached. This gives him comfort in knowing that the couple survived both their changes and so each other's presence and influence on each other will bring them closer and stronger together.

Inflation

A final recurrent theme that was prevalent for five out of the six couples including those who have not been together the longest, is the current financial situation particularly the

increasingly booming local property market that keeps getting harder to get into as young adults. Lisa says:

> [We] talk about a future together. I imagine… well I can't say we'll buy a house together, and that's not because we're not capable of living together…rather because property prices are through the roof and we aren't capable to generate that much money. We seriously consider living abroad.

Mia says that were it not for the financial aspect, they'd already be married and living together, which are milestones in their relationship that solidify and secure their couplehood thus delaying their ultimate loving status until they can afford it. Wayde and Rodianne are actively discussing saving arrangements at 19 and 21 years of age which is to them a first step for their love to keep developing in the future. Natasha is particularly worried about inflation, especially after experiencing her clients, as a social worker, struggling financially to make ends meet; she says "it's a stressful topic to think about at the moment".

Second Reading: Voices and Discourses

I conducted the second reading as recommended, this time noting and annotating prominent and less prominent voices and discourses. Some of the voices that featured often throughout the interviews were: those of their families of origin, media, religion, and the feminist voice. Concurrently, all the participants showed an equivocal view of the dominant discourse that partners are meant "to be there for each other", particularly in times of difficulty and it was a trait that helps them identify a loving relationship. Other secondary discourses emphasised by their frequency took the form of messages from society or people around them, a special caution advised upon entering romantic relationships, and gender-related discourses. There were subtle hints of individualistic attitudes and also surprisingly, half the couples quoted some literature about love theories that they were aware of. Table 4 below groups the respective findings from the second reading.

Table 4

Second Reading Findings

	Dominant Voices and Discourses	**Secondary Voices and Discourses**
Voices	Family of Origin	Media
		Religion/Church
		Feminist
		Theory
Discourses	Presence in Difficult Times	Messages from Society Regarding the Length of the Relationship
		Caution about Love
		Gender-Related Discourse
		Individualistic Approach

Families of Origin and Being Present

Voices of families of origin could be identified in how the couples relate after having heard what influences they bring from their self-proclaimed major sources of knowledge about love. For instance, Katia brings affectionate questions learnt from her family of origin into their relationship:

> I think because I grew up in a family where we've shown love more, most of the time I ask the questions…I don't really mind that much because I know that she had a different upbringing…. I know that in her family certain things do not get discussed or get sidelined.

Jacob similarly equates what he saw in his family to what he felt he was doing:

> I think my family showed me that the big gesture of love is enough so that I could enter into this relationship. I also used to look up to my brother who was going through a

> relationship at the time which he also started at 16 years of age and I saw that his experience was directly linked with what I was going through.

Raisa identifies the love in her family as genuine and effortless despite there being the occasional ups and downs. Through this, she equates her appreciation for her romantic relationship "because this relationship was not forced (mhix sfurzata), and I felt I chose it (mhix ta' bilfors)".

> This is something I struggled with, because I used to see that my mother was not very individuated from my father, and they also started at 16 years of age. He was her life's focus, she would never dream of doing something on her own or without him… Sometimes I notice myself falling into that way of being in the sense that I did not take myself, my goals and my wants into consideration. (Martha)

There was a dominant discourse of partners being "there for each other" and present in each others' lives both virtually and physically but mostly in difficult times. This was also a recurrent definition of love provided by the majority of the participants:

> She's always there for me, whenever I need someone to talk to… we're there for each other, she understands me. (Ed)

> We were never worried that we'd leave each other because of the distance that covid created. But obviously, it was very difficult and challenging not seeing each other… We used to make do with virtual meet-ups, have fancy dates or games nights over calls. (Lisa)

> The presence of people in my life shows me love is also present just like when there is a lack of presence when it is needed, it shows me limited or inexistent love. (Wayde)

Voices of the Media

Whilst families of origin were highly influential on all the participants' perspectives of love, most of them also noted the voice of the media that surrounds them as being significant. For Martha, the media served as a mirror of the perfect ideal couple/marriage of her parents whose relationship she idolised. For Lisa and Katia, the lack of LGBTIQ love represented in the series and films they watched growing up did not validate their feelings or model "homosexual relationships" for them to have a significant useful reference for their romantic love from the media. At the same time, Ben and Natasha, and Jacob and Mia acknowledged that they were influenced by comparing relationships and setting high expectations on love, especially the women, but then realising that what is shown on screen is very different to the reality they were experiencing. The former of the two couples even attributed the propagated narrative of the male protector to messages they received from the media "I used to love Disney where there was always Prince Charming saving the princess, that affected me, I was under the impression that through Ed, my insecurities would disappear" (Martha).

Voices of Religion/Church

Being brought up as an actively involved Catholic, Lisa said that she wished "the voice of the Church had a lesser role" in her formative teen years whilst negotiating and coming to terms with her identity: "First of all, I had to challenge my belief that love should only be between a man and a woman". Conversely, for Jacob, his meaning of love was conditioned by the fact that they "are not living as a married couple in the same household" therefore he can't say his relationship is "everything" to him as yet. Mia adds to his comments that had it not been for the financial barriers, at this stage in their lives they would already have been "married and living together" in their ideal world. On a different note, Alex, Raisa, Wayde and Rodianne made

references to religious teachings about the "perfect love" when widening their reflections about where they learned about love.

The Voice of Theory

Half the couples (Natasha and Ben, Martha and Ed, Alex and Raisa,) made reference freely to Chapman's (2005) love languages and tried to describe their love language and which one they experienced from their partner most. Ben also echoed ideas from Gottman's Sound Relationship House theory in creating shared meaning that:

> The more you spend time with the person and the more experiences you go through together, the more you will get to love the person… because automatically, those experiences will not be just your own, they'll belong to the couple.

Similarly, Martha said that they were "friends for two years before their relationship." Alex also (mis)quoted Gottman's Love Lab exercise in referring to the study that "predicts a couple's divorce probability by 95% accuracy". Alex and Raisia claimed to have come across these concepts at their local youth group where they are both very active as youth leaders. Lastly, some of the couples also described processes of we-ness such as when Ed explains: "We like joined our backgrounds and I feel that through time, we're creating our own current reality".

Individualism, the Feminist Voice, Gender-Related Discourse and Caution about Love

From individualistic perspectives, Alex and Lisa champion the master narrative of both individuals in their respective couples having their own separate lives carried on whilst being in a relationship. Alex's major goal is for both their career improvement, further education and self-growth "I don't consider it as teamwork, because it is not necessary that she's involved in everything I do for me to succeed". Similarly, Lisa claims "she has her things and I have my

own things". In turn, Katia claims she learned the following about love from Lisa "we don't need to be a couple first, we are Lisa and Katia first and then we're a couple when we're together".

Ed showed a similar empowering stance toward Martha to be her own person. However, he favoured the narrative of a strong independent woman, similar to how he views his mother. In contrast to the previous couples, he comes from the position that should there be the need for both of them to depend less on each other (suggesting one of them passes away), neither will end up in crisis and disenabled.

On a different note, Natasha recounts her parents being very cautious about her dating men. She recalled an image her mother warned her with; whereby "men are like chickens, they just pick at people". She also recounts how gender and sexuality still are taboo subjects at her house and that she cannot be open with them with regard to her own gender. Similarly, Lisa and Katia experienced:

> Older generations such as our parents, unfortunately, do not appreciate that our relationship is as valid and legitimate as any other. At first, it used to bother us more, … now we are both comfortable enough in our relationship that we do not look for that external validation from our parents. Our friends are the ones who mostly see our love. (Katia)

A different warning that Mia faced from her parents was for her not to rush into relationships "thinking you'll last long. You must stay focused on schooling, you can't enter into such commitments as yet".

Time - Messages from society regarding the length of relationships

A dominant narrative that these couples receive as a message from society is that success in relationships is measured by the length of the relationship "I feel that's one of the first things people notice" (Natasha). Mia and Jacob experience peers asking them "how do you manage to stay in a relationship for so long?" or people "turning to us automatically when topics relate to

love and relationships assuming that we are experts because we've been longest in a relationship from our friend group." Mia continues "it's strange for them that we're still together and plan to stay together having started so young".

As a theme, time was prevalent in how the couples internalise the messages above and measure relationships accordingly. Jacob attests to confidence in his relationship based on his parents' long journey as a married couple:

> I think when we started our relationship we had a lot of things in common, even about what love meant, our backgrounds… we can claim this success in a way because my parents have been together for around 35 years and her parents over 30 years so we have models with over a quarter of a century's worth of experience.

This consolidates past studies referred to earlier whereby commitment, in this case perceived by the length of time in the relationship, fosters feelings of security and less fear of rejection and abandonment (Madey & Rodgers, 2009; Sternberg, 1986).

Interestingly, this communicated perception about the correlation between love and the length of a relationship comes across at a time whereby we are increasingly surrounded by reality tv shows trying to match off participants in controlled and recorded environments claiming to search and find love in a short span of days or weeks. Such shows include but are not limited to Perfect Match, Love is Blind, and Love Island, with the latter having also been produced for the first time in Malta a few weeks before the time of submission of this paper and whose publicly-most-voted couple in love split just after a week and a half post-finale. As a disclaimer, one must definitely not ignore the participants' financial and exposure rewards that underlie such productions.

Third Reading: Patterns

The guidelines I am following give an allowance for variations of the analysis method depending on the output of the study. It acknowledges that in book format publications of

narrative analysis, there is ample space to delve deep into the analysis. However, in shorter publications such as dissertations or compressed journal articles, it may as well be required to sacrifice the holistic nature of the analysis in favour of keeping to a limited word limit (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). In this case, I, unfortunately, had to take the decision to make reference to the patterns in the other readings rather than present patterns for each individual interview on the basis of space limitations as well as to prioritise emphasis on the comprehensively integrated links of the processed information.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

In continuation with the previous chapter, I will present the fourth and fifth readings in a similar structure to link the data gathered to the existing literature and also to the datasets themselves as a whole body of texts. Both sections will aim to answer the original research questions:

- How do young adult couples construct and understand love within their romantic relationship?
- What factors and sources had a significant impact on shaping the participants' understanding of love?

Fourth Reading: Links with Theory

The fourth reading will incorporate the patterns elicited from the previous reading and link them to the existing literature as definitions and understanding of love. Namely, the theories that the participants themselves made direct or indirect reference to the Five Love Languages, Gottman's Sound Relationship House and We-ness will be discussed. Moreover, as dominant voices informing the couples, links with parents' and media influence will also be developed further.

The Five Love Languages

Presence was an immensely pertinent theme in identifying love, and they also related it to the effort required to maintain their romantic relationships more so than in any other relationship. Whilst most of them specifically mentioned "being there" as a supportive mechanism especially in times of hardship for the couple or either individual, their appreciation

for presence came out in various other ways as well. Chapman's (2004) Five Love Languages can be viewed as reciprocal presence in themselves. Whilst many mentioned this theory and tried to identify which of the languages pertains to either one of the couple, all five were somehow mentioned as appreciated gestures ("the little things") by their partners in that they confirm they feel loved and seen by their significant other. Chapman (2004) identified the feelings of enhanced self-worth and security in couples when they feel loved and valued by their spouse. This was also reflected in the participants' assuredness and comfort in talking about their future together and with me during the interview.

Referring to Gottman's theories about friendship and arguing

"At the heart of the Seven Principles approach is the simple truth that happy marriages are based on a deep friendship" (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p. 21). Many of the couples also referred to their relationship as starting out as friends first and having developed as a romantic relationship over time. This is another reflection of existing literature whereby Gottman and Silver (2015) promote a stable friendship base between a couple. In Gottman's Sound Relationship House metaphor, successful couples have a strong friendship foundation, characterized by fondness, admiration, shared values, and a positive perspective towards each other (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Simic et al., 2018). Lastly, Hendrick and Hendrick's (1993) research also shows the significance of both passion and friendship in young adults' romantic relationships.

Interestingly, Alex quoted also Gottman's Seattle Love lab experiment (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). Although, technically, he misquoted some details pertaining to the study's findings; he mentioned it in the context of "arguing because there is love" just as he sees his parents and Raisa's parents do. That is, they argue in a way that it won't loom over the couple after it is dealt with. This echoes the concept of fighting fairly that is with the aim of prioritising

the relationship, as well as highlights the responsibility parents carry when modelling healthy argument styles (Downs & Downs, 2010; Miga, Gdula & Allen, 2012).

We-ness

Another narrative that some of the couples made reference to in their understanding of what constitutes being in a loving romantic relationship is the concept of "We-ness". The concept of shared identity brings forward the new formed identity between the couple without compromising the original identities of either partner (Stanley, 2021). Therefore, the couples who saw themselves as a unit, as Martha described: "just like two plants watering each other… a safe space…" to branch out, were, in fact, talking about their mutual respect as individuals within their couple bubble. This was not evident among all the couples who participated. It must be noted, however, that the couples whose we-ness was least portrayed were the couples who have been together the shortest. The relational concept of we-ness requires the building of a new identity therefore, it is no surprise nor is it a fateful observation that these young couples are still in the process of co-creating their shared sense of couple identity.

Parents' Influences

It ties in with existing literature that parents get to be quite involved in an adolescent and young adult's life (Azzopardi, 2007; Soloski et al., 2013). This can also be observevd in Malta where the close-knit culture encourages and many times permits more access into adult children's lives. To mention just one maintaining feature in this assertion is the fact that normally young adults reside with their parents for much longer than they used to in the past or when compared to other Western countries. Therefore, as reported in the interviews, either through solicited advice throughout their upbringing or simply by being present, the parents of these participants were highly influential when it came to their young adults' perceptions and understandings of love.

Jamison and Lo (2021) posit that grown-up children internalise and implement the behaviours and characteristics of parents whom they consider positive role models. In instances where parents are viewed as negative role models, young adults engage in a process of trial and error as they search for partners who can help them avoid repeating their parents' errors. Alternatively, they may commit to a partner at a young age in order to establish their own family. Adult children also seek love, validation, and support from their romantic partners, particularly in areas where they feel their parents fell short in providing those aspects. This matches the participants' responses and reflections. Whilst most reported positive interactions and relationships with their families of origin, two individuals spoke about their search for something different than what they were already exposed to in their families. An interesting highlight would be, however, that whilst the participants claimed they learned about love from their parents, many viewed them as parents and not as couples themselves.

This has also been attributed by other scholars to Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This theory suggests a more elementary form of learning based on constructing new patterns from direct experience or by observing others' behaviours (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Watching how parents engage in romantic relationships has a significant impact on both the way children perceive relationships and their ability to develop and sustain fulfilling relationships in adulthood (Jamison & Lo, 2021). In the participants' accounts, at some stage, all mentioned that their parents are still together and that they appreciate that fact. I wonder, if this life experience had been different to any of them, how it might have impacted their narratives of love and their respective romantic relationships. Whilst I am happy and inspired by these parents' commitment to each other and their families, perhaps this could have been a limitation to the richness and diversity of the participation pool (that was not controlled for) given the reality around us increasingly experiencing divorces and separations. In light of this, perhaps future research on the topic can delve into the parents' relationships and understanding of love

together with their respective young adults', coming from single-parent or blended family backgrounds.

The Media Influence

As expected, the media did in fact, hold a present voice in the participants' relating to concepts about love within their relationship. Martha claims to have been an avid Disney film enthusiast, which she felt affected her ideas; ".. and then you see Prince Charming coming to save the girl… I used to think that through Ed, all my insecurities will leave". In their study, Vaterlaus et al, (2018) found that while entertainment media served as a source of role models for expected behaviour in romantic relationships, it was also linked to the formation of unrealistic expectations and a perceived sense of pressure to be involved in a romantic relationship. Whilst it did not come across as such a strong influential voice, most of the participants acknowledged this awareness and claimed responsibility in subsequently identifying that by no means were they to use this 'model' to compare to in their own relationships. Mia thinks some films portray "too unrealistic things" she thinks it's just the reason why they are watched; "it's nice to have something like that to look at, but it's not ideal to base your relationship on them".

Despite their will to separate the media expectations from 'more realistic ones', several participants still felt affected. In fact, the voice of the media also incorporates the different messages that the participants claimed received from society at large that shaped their perceptions. These thick descriptions of standard, stereotypical and at times chivalrous expectations of what love and being in a relationship constitutes, allowed for a thinner description to form either by experience or the lack thereof. By the latter, I refer to the gender-based discourses and lack of media representation that some of the participants experienced.

Fifth Reading - Uniting the Narratives

The fifth reading will further solidify and unify patterns the emerged and not yet discussed or were absent within the interviews of the participants such as their common worry about financial stability amid the inflation were are currently experiencing. Further to what was mentioned by the participants about their love in what is present in their relationships, sex and sexual intimacy were lacking in all their accounts. Lastly, I will end this section with some personal reflections on this process in relation to the outcome of this study.

Finances and Inflation

Talking about finances might not be an easy task (Saxey et al., 2022), especially in our culture and in the participants' contexts where many were still starting out in the world of employment or not yet gainfully employed adults making their own money. Although some of the participants are relatively young, it was evident that their plans for the future are more than just hypothetical dreams. In line with their efforts, research encourages financial discussions between couples for the benefit and well-being of their couplehood (Gottman et al., 2019; Saxey et al., 2022). Their concern about making ends meet as a couple family unit is quite legitimate and mature. Reports show that the inflation rate in Malta has increased from 5.8% in May 2022 to 6.3% in May 2023 (Borg, 2023b). Natasha, who speaks from experience and is also informed by her clients as a social worker, worries that "the current times we're living in are basically a headache to keep up with the cost of living so you have to lower your standards and expectations of what you want from life." She even went further to describe this topic as "stressful".

A recent local survey shows that "Malta's cost of living, the traffic situation, and the influx of construction are the top three issues that are most concerning young Maltese people between the ages of 16 and 34." (Vella, 2023). This leads me to link the property market challenges that these young adults also mentioned in their concerns about their future plans. Member of Parliament Omar Farrugia recently highlighted this issue noting that the increased

rate of young adults living longer with their parents (as were all the participants) is affected by the too-expensive property market. He also spoke about a fine line that young couples must navigate in choosing a comfortable and affordable property or a limited housing arrangement with intentions to grow a family. Lastly, he adds that should rent be an option for these couples, the expense involved would not make it viable to save up for a property later on (Diacono, 2023). Having been actively involved in the property market for the past three and a half years up until a few months before the time of writing, I thoroughly understand and empathise with the issue of inflation for such couples, some of whom are still furthering their education. I also resonate with the fact that at a certain age wanting to 'flee the nest' might come naturally when one is ready. The unfortunate reality of not affording having their own space put more pressure on the participating couples and how their relationship is perceived by themselves and those around them. Such pressures might lead to strive to earn more income, most probably at the expense of spending less time together, to afford buying property together.

Sexual Intimacy and the Lack Thereof

In Sternberg's Triangular love theory emphasis is placed on the three factors of intimacy, passion and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). The couples in this study made several references to their emotional intimacy and the commitment they identify as love within their relationships. However, there was a stark lack of mentioning the passion pillar of this theory through talk about sex and sexual intimacies. Gottman and Gottman (2017) incorporate sexual relations in the third and final phase of love, which they call 'building commitment and loyalty'. They also differentiate between "sex" and "making love" according to the depth and meaning of the relationship (Gottman & Gottman, 2017, p. 23). A contributing factor to this lack of mention could very well be the taboo connotated around the subject ingrained in our culture. Possibly, due to the heavy religious influence on our culture (despite statistics showing a decline in faith practitioners) talking about pre-marital sex and/or sexual activities might be uncomfortable

keeping in mind that the voice of religion/the church was a common voice referred to among some of the couples (Borg, 2023a).

Self-reflexivity

First of all, I anticipated a lot of worries and concerns for the interview stage on the lines of not asking the right questions or whether I will run out of questions too early in the process. However, after the first interview, I felt comfortable enough to be their friend, especially since I am just a few years older than the eldest of the criteria pool. Obviously, this reflection worried me and so, whilst processing the interview and in preparation for the other interviews, I set boundaries with myself to operate from the researcher role and avoid the more natural and familiar roles of friend or therapist. These reminders through my internal dialogue to keep up my position in these interactions, helped me maintain my ethical boundaries.

Secondly, whilst I could relate a lot to most of what the couples were discussing, as anticipated because of the close age gap, there were narratives that I could not connect with fully. Needless to say, I did not expect to. However, I found a missing link to what makes the partner special over any other close friend, according to their dominant discourse about what they understand by love within their romantic relationship. It was enriching to hear couples talk about their love narratives and I feel honoured to have gained their trust over just one interview to discuss such profound matters. Most of the couples confessed that this was the most in-depth talk about their love and what they understand, and perhaps expect, from their romantic partner. This was feedback that I truly appreciated because it brought me back to my experience of not having discussed our relationship in a lot of depth with my now fiancé. This to me has high clinical value as well, which I will carry when working with couples, especially as young adults.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of the current perspectives and experiences of love among young adults in the context of their romantic relationships. Furthermore, the study aims to explore the various factors and sources that hold influence over the participants' conceptualisation of love and how they subsequently apply and embody this understanding in their respective romantic relationships. By delving into these aspects, the study strives to shed light on the intricate interplay between individual experiences, external influences, and the development of love within the realm of young adult romantic partnerships.

Six couples between the ages of 18 to 25 answered to my recruitment call to participate in the study. Their relationship length varied from one and a half years to eight years together and they came from different backgrounds, some are gainfully employed, some are part-time students and others full-time students. I applied a narrative analysis to the recorded and transcribed interviews by following Josselson and Hammack's (2021) procedure of 5 different readings.

The findings yielded the dominant discourse among all couples that they've learnt about love mostly from their experiences within their families of origin and that they remarkably value presence within a loving relationship. This further highlights the value of the family of origin in one's upbringing for their future adult relationships and own family formation. Moreover, other voices which influenced their constructions of love included the media, religion and the theories about love that they were aware of. Interestingly, some subjugated discourses that preoccupied or influenced their understanding of romantic love came from messages that they received from society at large and the people around them, the length of relationships, and social influences such as inflation, which they perceive as a challenge to their future as a couple unit. Lastly, the

importance of discussions about love within the couple were often taken rather lightly among the participant pool of this study. Therefore, such discussions lend themselves also essential also in the therapy room.

Limitations and Recommendations

As with many researches, a few limitations were encountered with in this study. Firstly, I consider the fact that I did not feel comfortable asking about the couples' sexual intimacies, for personal reasons, a drawback that could have unearthed deeper meanings attributed to their couple life. Secondly, I identify the naturally short length of presentation space whereby, findings and discussions linking with existing therapy could have been further developmed.

Following up on this study, it would be interesting to have such discussions about a multi-racial couple's experiences and construction of love. It would be interesting to explore how they bridge their cultures and experiences of love within our increasingly cosmopolitan society. In light of the findings of this study, I would suggest adding a generational layer. By this I mean that the parents's views and practices of love as a couple, as parents and family heads; be taken also into consideration along side their children's account. Given the local context, I wonder if the participants had different living arrangements away from their families of origin, how that would impact their understanding of love in their romantic relationships. Lastly, since all the participants mentioned their parents' lengthy relationship, having a diverse family of origin setup as a variable would also provide a new dynamic closely impacting the young adults' conceptualisation of love, how they were socialised to learn it and how they carry it on to their own romantic relationships.

References

Abela, A., Vella, S., & Piscopo, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Couple Relationships in a Global Context: Understanding Love and Intimacy Across Cultures*. Springer Nature.

Azzopardi, C., (2007) *Expectations of marriage before and after the first year of marriage among Maltese Catholic couples*. DSysPsych thesis, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust.

Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977). *Social learning theory* (Vol. 1). Prentice Hall: Englewood cliffs.

Borg, N. (2023a, February 19). Malta's most and least religious towns revealed. *Times of Malta* . Retrieved June 28, 2023, from https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/maltas-least-religious-towns-revealed.1014498 .

Borg, N. (2023b, June 27). Fact-check: is malta's inflation rate lower than in many other countries? *Times of Malta*. Retrieved June 28, 2023, from https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/factcheck-is-malta-inflation-rate-lower-many-countries.1040232.

Bruner, J. (2004). Life as narrative. *Social research: An international quarterly*, *71*(3),

691-710.

Campbell, D., & Draper, R. (1985). *Applications of Systemic Family Therapy: The Milan Approach*. London: Grune & Stratton.

Chapman, G. (2004). *The five love languages: The secret to love that lasts*. Northfield Publishing, Chicago.

Chase, S. E. (1996). Personal vulnerability and interpretive authority in narrative research. In R. Josselson (Ed.) *Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives.*

Chase S. E. (2018). Narrative Inquiry: Toward Theoretical and Methodological Maturity. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th edition, 946-970).

Considine, D. M. (2009). From gutenberg to gates: Media matters. *The Social Studies*, *100*(2), 63-74.

Crowell, J. A., & Waters, E. (1994). Bowlby's theory grown up: The role of attachment in adult love relationships. *Psychological Inquiry*, *5*(1), 31-34.

Diacono, T. (2023, March 14). Watch: in powerful speech, pl mp warns sky high property prices are harming youths and causing malta's low birth rate. *Lovin Malta* . Retrieved June 28, 2023, from https://lovinmalta.com/news/watch-in-powerful-speech-pl-mp-warns-sky-high-proper

ty-prices-are-harming-youths-and-maltas-birth-rate/.

Downs, T., & Downs, J. (2010). *Fight Fair: Winning at Conflict Without Losing at Love*. Moody Publishers.

Driesmans, K., Vandenbosch, L., & Eggermont, S. (2016). True love lasts forever: The influence of a popular teenage movie on Belgian girls' romantic beliefs. *Journal of Children and Media*, *10*(3), 304-320.

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using our selves in research*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Goldenberg, H., & Goldenberg, I. (2008). *Family therapy: An overview*.

Gottman, J., & Silver, N. (2015). *The seven principles for making marriage work: A practical guide from the country's foremost relationship expert*. Harmony.

Gottman, J., & Gottman, J. (2017). The natural principles of love. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *9*(1), 7-26.

Gottman, J., Gottman, J. S., Abrams, D., & Abrams, R. C. (2019). *Eight dates: essential conversations for a lifetime of love*. Workman Publishing.

Grace, C., & Meuhlhoff, T. (Hosts). (2016, September 14). Gottman's Best Relationship Advice Pt. 1 (No. 11) [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Art of Relationships Podcast*. Biola

University Center for Marriage and Relationships.

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *52*(3), 511-524.

Hendrick, S. S., & Hendrick, C. (1993). Lovers as Friends. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *10*(3), 459–466. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407593103011

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. SAGE.

Jamison, T. B., & Lo, H. Y. (2021). Exploring parents' ongoing role in romantic development: Insights from young adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 38(1), 84–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520958475

Josselson, R., & Hammack, P. L. (2021). *Essentials of narrative analysis*. American Psychological Association.

Madey, S. F., & Rodgers, L. (2009). The Effect of Attachment and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love on Relationship Satisfaction. *Individual Differences Research*, *7* (2).

Mickel, E., & Hall, C. (2006). Family therapy in transition: Love is a healing behavior. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*, *25*(2), 32.

Miga, E. M., Gdula, J. A., & Allen, J. P. (2012). Fighting fair: Adaptive marital conflict strategies

as predictors of future adolescent peer and romantic relationship quality. *Social Development*, *21*(3), 443-460.

Migerode, L., & Hooghe, A. (2012). 'I love you'. How to understand love in couple therapy? Exploring love in context. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *34*(4), 371-386.

National Statistics Office Malta. (2020). *International Day of Families: 2020* (p. 9).

Rober, P. (2005). The therapist's self in dialogical family therapy: Some ideas about not‐knowing and the therapist's inner conversation. *Family process*, *44*(4), 477-495.

Sarbin, T. R. (1986). *The narrative as a root metaphor for psychology*.

Schleiermacher, F. (1998). *Hermeneutics and criticism and other writings*.

Segrin, C., & Nabi, R. L. (2002). Does television viewing cultivate unrealistic expectations about marriage?. *Journal of Communication*, *52*(2), 247-263.

Smith, J., Larkin, M., & Flowers, P. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. London: SAGE.

Simic, M., Eisler, I., Lebow, J., Chambers, A., & Breunlin, D. (2018). E*ncyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*.

Soloski, K. L., Pavkov, T. W., Sweeney, K. A., & Wetchler, J. L. (2013). The social construction of love through intergenerational processes. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *35*(4), 773-792.

Stanley, S. (2021, June 14). *Me, you, and US: We-ness and couple identity*. Institute for Family Studies. https://ifstudies.org/blog/me-you-and-us-we-ness-and-couple-identity

Sternberg, R. J. (1986). A triangular theory of love. *Psychological review*, *93*(2), 119.

Vaterlaus, J. M., Tulane, S., Porter, B. D., & Beckert, T. E. (2018). The perceived influence of media and technology on adolescent romantic relationships. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *33*(6), 651-671.

Vella, S. (2023, June 2). Cost of living, traffic, and construction top concerns for young maltese, new survey finds. *Lovin Malta*. Retrieved June 28, 2023, from https://lovinmalta.com/news/cost-of-living-traffic-and-construction-top-concerns-for-young-maltese-new-survey-finds/.

Wertz, F. J. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry*. Guilford Press.

Appendices

Appendix A

Information Sheet and Consent Form

My name is Clara Marie Campbell and I am a trainee systemic family therapist at the Institute of Family Therapy- Malta reading for a Masters' degree in Systemic Family-Psychotherapy. I am presently conducting research as part of my dissertation titled Love Narratives: The understanding of love in young adult romantic relationships. I am being supervised by Dr Charlie Azzopardi, azzopardi.charlie@ift-malta.com. The aim of my study is to understand young adults' way of perceiving and experiencing love within their romantic relationships. The study will also delve into the participants' source of influence or inspiration of their love narratives.

Your Participation

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for the purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to attend an interview with me, as the researcher, in a private and comfortable setting. The interview is intended to take around 60 minutes, however, it can take a bit less or slightly run over the projected time span.

Data will be collected through anonymised semi-structured interviews and analysed accordingly with the use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Moreover, any identifying details will not be used in the write up of the dissertation to further ensure your valued privacy.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason.

You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from you will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it

is anonymised or published). Unless the erasure of data would render it impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the research objectives, data shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you except for a small token of appreciation for participating in my study and contributing to the expansion of local literature around the subject of love.

Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting supervisor Dr Azzopardi, and we will try to help and support you with what you'd need. We are aware that sensitive subjects may be brought up during the interview and we offer therapeutic support at the IFT-Malta Training Clinic should more processing need to be done as a result from the interview session.

Data Management

The data collected will be treated confidentially, pseudonymised and coded as part of the analysis procedure. Personal data and research data will be stored separately as local copies on my password-protected laptop and a back-up saved on an external hard disk with similar password-protection. My supervisor and myself will be the only handlers of such data.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

All data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study and permanently discarded after 12 months unless needed for further publication of the study, in which case, erasure will take place after such publication is completed.

Your identity will be revealed/attributed only with your consent.

Participant's consent

- I hereby declare to have read the information about the nature of the study, my involvement and data management.

- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my questions have been satisfactorily answered.
- I declare that I fall within the 18-25 year old bracket.
- I understand that should I have any further queries, I can contact Dr Charlie Azzopardi on azzopardi.charlie@ift-malta.com
- I agree to participate in this research study.

MARK ONLY IF APPLICABLE

- ☐ I agree to be identified in the research records.
- ☐ I agree to be identified in the research publications.

_____ _____

Participants' names (in block) Researcher's name (in block)

_____ _____

Participants' signatures Researcher's signature

_____

Date

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Demographic Beginning Questions

- Names, ages, where from, what do you do?
- Is this your first serious romantic relationship?

Interview Phase 1

- What did you experience as love before going into this relationship? (individually)
- Where did you learn about love?
- What does love mean to you?
- How do you recognise it
- What did you learn from other relationships about love?

Interview Phase 2

- Do you ever talk about your love together? How do you come about this conversation? Context?
- How would you say you give meaning to your love story?
- How did your previous experience/s or knowledge about love affect the love you experience now within your couple's life?
- In the presence or absence of your discussions about love, how did you influence each other with your ideas?
- How do you know your partner loves you and vice versa?
- How do you negotiate your love as a couple and how do you convince each other of your love?

Interview Phase 3

- How do you think your love will grow or change in the future?
- Who else will see this love between you?