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The Functioning of Romantic Love Myths as an Interpretive Framework for Young Girls' Experiences of Romantic Relationships: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

In this article, we explore young girls' love experiences and their conceptions of love in the context of changing intimacy and diverse relationship models. In order to gain insight into how adolescent girls understand their experiences of affection, we conducted a study using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Following the IPA assumptions, the sample selection was purposeful. Features were established on the basis of which a homogeneous group was identified, whose experiences will not be differentiated due to: the number and nature of experiences (no more than three or a maximum of four heterosexual emotional relationships), attitude to religion (moderate) and family type (full). The research involved in-depth interviews with six adolescent girls who had experiences of affectionate relationships. The interview transcriptions constituted the raw empirical material analysed according to IPA

guidelines (Smith et al., 2009). The analyses aimed to annotate the transcriptions, identify emerging themes and collate them in search of common super-ordinate themes. Four themes emerged from the analysis that were common across the study group. One of these, described in detail, concerned the belief in myths associated with romantic love and its impact on young girls' perceptions of relationships and interpretations of emotional experiences. The super-ordinate theme emerging from the narratives of the female respondents are related to the culturally sustained belief in the possibility of finding the "perfect partner" and the romantically enmeshed belief in "true love", whose strength is able to overcome all difficulties. Our analyses revealed that romanticising relationships provides a framework for interpreting one's own experiences, but also shapes these experiences (motivating certain behaviours, e.g. to "fight for an emotional relationship". Belief in romantic myths, e.g. the idealisation of the relationship and the partner, can cause difficulties in ending relationships, detrimental to their young person's mental health.

Keywords: romantic love myths, adolescent girls, romantic relationship, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Introduction

The research presented here aimed to describe and understand the meanings and significance given by adolescent girls to their experiences of being in affective relationships. The theoretical and methodological framework for the analyses was set by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which allows us to grasp adolescent girls' love relationships "from the inside", so to speak, i.e. from the perspective of the subject involved in its duration. The picture of adolescent girls' love sketched in the empirical chapter is thus woven from their personal experiences, accompanying feelings and experiences. The innovation of the conducted study lies in the recognition of young women's intimate relationships from a micro-perspective enabling "insight into individual, original and unique human experiences" (Rubacha, 2019, p. 435). The aim of the reflections undertaken in this article is to enrich (add to) the current state of knowledge about the unique ways in which intimate relationships are experienced and lived from the point of view of the young girls involved in their persistence.

Justification for undertaking the research

The interest in the subjective meanings imposed by adolescent women on the experience of being in an emotional relationship draws its justification from two sources: the condition of scientific discourse and the dynamic transformations of contemporary culture, significantly problematising the context of young people's intimate relationships. We expand on each of the indicated themes below.

The state of scientific knowledge on young people's emotional relations is influenced by functioning myths about adolescent emotional relations. Relationships entered into by adolescents were thought to be superficial and transient, may involve risky behaviours and merely reflect the influence of other, more accessible social systems (Brown et al., 1999, pp. 1–16; Collins, 2003, pp. 1–8). In the Polish literature, adolescents' feelings are still sometimes referred to by the terms: “puppy love”, “carnal love” (Hurlock, 1965; Kielar-Turska, 2000; Obuchowska, 2002, p. 178). As a result, the development of research in this area has been severely limited, which has allowed us to identify the phenomenon of a cognitive gap consisting in the existence of a significant disproportion between analyses of young romantic relationships from a functional-structuralist and interpretivist-humanist perspective. Previous analyses have mainly focused on explaining the relationships occurring between love and development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Kłym & Cieniuch, 2003; Kacprzak, 2015) and adolescents' mental health (Viejo et al., 2015; Price et al., 2016), on the identification of biological mechanisms and demographic and (inter)cultural patterns: dating, falling in love, experiencing emotions (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Brannon, 2002; Płonka-Syroka, 2008a; 2008b; Tsirigotis et al., 2010; Chapman, 2011; Karandashew, 2015; Cruces et al., 2015; Ceretti & Navarro, 2018; Nava-Reyes et al., 2018; Odegard, 2021), as well as on the characterisation of issues such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and experiencing relationship violence (Bidzan, 2007; 2013; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). The dominance of the functional-structuralist paradigm has allowed us to characterise the phenomenon of interest from the point of view of general regularities occurring at the macro level (Burell & Morgan, 1979; Rubacha, 2019). Research inquiring into the individualised meanings of experienced adolescent love relation-

ships is rare. The issue of adolescent dating appears more frequently in journalistic and media discourse (usually when shocking information or events are made public) than in Polish scientific discourse. Considering the fact that romantic relationships are central in the lives of adolescents, we find the state of affairs in the scientific literature worrying. After all, experiencing love itself can be “the most individual experience, which many of us consider to give meaning to their individual existence” (Płonka-Syroka, 2008a, p. 7). Its essence is particularly significant for adolescents, experiencing various, often contradictory and difficult feelings and emotions in connection with it, fuelled by romantic messages provided by mass culture, song lyrics, films and the Internet. Understanding the intimate feelings, convictions and emotions of the young people involved in the relationship provides an opportunity to genuinely negotiate and experience contemporary realities with one’s own children/pupils/young people. In the face of the ever-changing and unstable conditions of contemporary life, we consider it particularly important to “develop in young people the habit of consciously making choices with regard to the shape of their own self” (Melosik, 2007, p. 90). The moralistic tone and the tendency to trivialise current cultural trends give way to a dialogue open to differences between generations, different experiences and a genuinely felt need to (re)understand oneself. Identifying the meanings and significance imposed by adolescent women on the experience of being in an emotional relationship is therefore particularly important in the face of dynamic cultural changes and the resulting transformations of intimacy.

The social, demographic, economic and identity changes intensified at the end of the last century resulted in the formation of a new type of culture, referred to by sociologists as late or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007; Giddens, 2012). Its ever-changing, fluid conditions have significantly modified the acceptable models of intimate relationships, thus problematising the choices made in this area. The search for the “perfect partner”, the belief in the existence of “true love” and the treatment of intimate relationships as fundamental life projects coexist with increasing divorce rates, decreasing numbers of marriages and a pluralisation of accepted models of intimate relationships (e.g. homosexual relationships, cohabitation) (Jasińska-Kania, 2012). The experience of growing up, and consequently observing the relationships of “significant adults” in full, incomplete, reconstructed, patchwork, LAT-type

families intriguingly problematises adolescents' "socialisation into love", prompting ambivalent and decentralised messages about affectional relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Bryant, 2006). Thus, in the realm of adolescent bonding intimacy, numerous choices are made about the "infinite number of ways to create, improve and dissolve their relationships with others" (Giddens, 2012, p. 198). The low level of interdependence of young partners and the heterogeneous motivation to enter into an intimate relationship undoubtedly dynamise the arrangements of adolescent bonding interactions, leading to their flourishing or dissolution. The trajectory of romantic relationship development according to the pattern characteristic of the last century: "first adulthood, then dating, then a longer relationship, then sex, and finally marriage" (Szlendak, 2009, p. 10) co-occurs with the sexualisation of contemporary culture, which promotes the cult of the body, a consumerist lifestyle and an orientation towards immediate gratification (Melosik, 2007; Stadnik & Wójtewicz, 2009). The roles of "good girls" and morally unbreakable "princes on a white horse" clash with the models of the "ready-for-anything Lolita" and the "male hunk". Ambivalent cultural messages impose ambiguous prohibitions and injunctions on the sphere of "teenage sexuality", thus generating numerous conflicts, dilemmas and tensions often unnoticed by parents or teachers (Brannon, 2002; Wiseman, 2005, p. 35). In this article, we give the floor to adolescent girls themselves to talk about their love experiences. The lack of knowledge about how adolescents understand their own love experiences, what their conceptions of love are within the ongoing transformations of intimacy, the multiplicity of models of intimate relationships and the co-existence of different love discourses, led us to revisit the narratives obtained within the doctoral dissertation of the co-author of this article (Kacprzak-Wachniew, 2020).

Methodology

The methodological framework of the study conducted was set by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This is an approach in qualitative research that explores how people make sense of their significant life experiences. Regardless of what these experiences are about, what they are the result of or how they are evaluated, they have a personal meaning for the

individual, actively engaging their thoughts and feelings in interpreting the phenomena, objects and people they encounter in their lives. Access to the content of respondents' experiences always depends on what the respondents themselves say about them, which determines to a large extent the process of data collection and, later on, analysis. The researcher can only understand the experience through the interpretation of the explanations, descriptions, and accounts received, which is why, in addition to phenomenology, IPA also draws on hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Sample selection

In line with the IPA's assumptions, the sample selection was intentional. It was assumed that the study could be participated by a girl who has the experience of being in at least one established and already ended heterosexual relationship, assessed as an emotional relationship and lasting at least three months, within the last twelve months, currently not involved in an emotional relationship. In addition, characteristics were established on the basis of which it would be possible to identify a homogeneous group whose experiences would not be differentiated by: the number and nature of the experiences (no more than three, maximum four heterosexual emotional relationships), attitude to religion (moderate) and type of family (complete).

The tool that allowed individuals to be recruited for the study was an information brochure, aimed at pupils and their caretakers, distributed in schools.

Ultimately, two groups of three girls took part in the study. The differences that occurred between the subjects were due to their age (early and late adolescence). The characteristics of the study group were presented based on the length and numbers of previous emotional relationships (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of female respondents in terms of their differentiating variables.

Respondent	Age	School	Length of the last emotional relationship	Previous relationships
R1: Milena	18	High School	Approx. 2 years	1
R2: Judyta	18	High School	Approx. 6 months	4
R3: Natalia	17	High School	Approx. 1 year (2-month break)	2
R4: Magda	15	Middle School	Approx. 5 months (break)	3
R5: Alicja	15	Middle School	Approx. 2 years (4-month break)	2
R6: Beata	16	Middle School	Approx. 2 years (2 breaks: 6 and 2 months)	2

Source: Authors' research.

Data collection methods

Data collection was carried out by means of an in-depth interview conducted in a one-on-one setting. Following the interview guidelines suitable for IPA, an interview plan was prepared with ten general questions and supporting specific questions. For example, the general question: How did you meet and start a relationship with your partner? The specific questions were: How did you meet your partner? How did it happen that you became a couple? Describe a time when you knew each other but were not yet together? What did you think of this person during this time? Meetings with female respondents began with introducing themselves, discussing the purpose of the study and assuring them that their participation was anonymous and voluntary. Each time, respondents were also reminded that the interview was being recorded (audio) and asked if they consented to the recording of the interview for transcription purposes. At the end of the interview, girls were asked about their wellbeing and emotional state. Meetings with female respondents took place after obtaining consent from them and their parents in a school setting or in a university hall. Interviews were transcribed. The respondents' real names were replaced with pseudonyms and any information that would identify them was removed.

Data analysis

Interview transcriptions were a raw empirical material that was analyzed in accordance with the IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009). The conducted analyses aimed at: preparing notes on transcriptions, identifying emerging themes and compiling them in order to search for common master themes. Such a scheme was repeated for the development of each transcription. The basis for further analysis were tables of results, developed separately for each examined case. This version of the analyses was agreed on with the other author. The final version of the table of results was the basis for the discussion.

Results

As a result of the conducted analyses, 4 emerging themes common to the entire group emerged. Below is a table of results (Table 2), from which one super-ordinate theme will be described in detail, regarding the engagement and work that the respondents performed for the relationship in terms of its maintenance, but also striving for intimacy and emotional closeness of partners. The participants' narratives, representative of the subject described, are directly quoted under their pseudonyms.

Table 2. Overview of the emerging themes and super-ordinate theme.

Belief in the romantic myths – impact on perceptions of relationships, interpretation of experiences and behaviour
1) Being destined for each other
2) Staying in the relationship at all costs
3) Actions taken towards the relationship
4) Losing oneself in a relationship

Source: Authors' research.

Being destined for each other

The way respondents think about the relationship, partner and shared feelings reveals the myth of romantic love, or mutual destiny (the myth of the

half apple or soul mate). Myths play an important role in the process of constructing respondents' ideas about the course of a love relationship and provide a framework for interpreting their own feelings or ongoing events. The idealized beginning of the relationship, the matching of partners and the sincerity of feelings are all supposed to testify to the uniqueness of the relationship.

Alicja's narrative is an example of the manifestation of a romantic vision of love. She is a student of the second year of junior high school. Her relationship lasted intermittently for two years. At the time of the interview, the girl was still strongly emotionally attached to her former partner and maintained a relationship with him, hoping that they would get back together.

The source of the nascent feeling and the circumstances of the partners' meeting are seen as an orchestration of fate, the result of a higher power:

"normally such a meeting of two people who seem to have known each other for a couple of years, and knew each other literally you could say one day" (R5: Alicja).

The above-quoted passage evokes associations with the metaphor of soul mates, whose union is a condition of achieved happiness, fulfilment and harmony. Indeed, the experience of love is a process that escapes all rational control and, as Judyta notes, goes itself. She is a high school student and remains emotionally attached to her former partner despite the end of the relationship.

"you know, it's nice that someone took the initiative and I started to open up to him so quickly, just gradually, gradually, and I had already opened up, and I was, so to speak, served on a plate, right? I showed everything, how I felt and what I was like in general, and he... he, I don't know, skipped it and left it, right? And it made me so sad (quieter). I've learnt, well I've certainly learnt, to get so, well that's what you say, it comes out every time so I shouldn't get so attached, but what am I supposed to do about it when it happens on its own, right?" (R2: Judyta).

Love is therefore an overpowering and all-encompassing feeling, rendering the affected respondents completely defenceless against the compelling power of the feeling. For this reason, one "falls into" or is "served on a plate"

in love. These terms come from the narrative of Judyta, who compares the experience of love to an illness, seeing it as a source of potential hurt and suffering. Judyta thus equates love with a tremendous force that overpowers those affected by it. Even when a relationship breaks down or becomes a source of negative emotion, it is impossible to calm the emotions that are hitting a person. After all, love is such a damning attachment and all:

“I mean, I’ll always remember him, because I’ve never had another boyfriend like him, so... when I see him, maybe in some other time something will come back, but for now it’s so awful... without him [quieter]. [...] I guess it was such a love, as they say – such a true love. Such a damn attachment and all that. That’s what I think it was, because looking back, if I’d been in one relationship there, maybe I wouldn’t have been able to judge it that way, and since I’d already been in three before, and even ones that were relatively long, well, I rather have a point of reference to it. And I’m already saying – six months have passed and I’m still healing after Bartek” (R2: Judyta).

It can be assumed that the attachment Judyta mentions remains in connection with the “quiet marriage”. Alicja refers to:

“when I look at it now, for example, well, I sometimes laugh so much that it’s kind of our quiet marriage. [...] for me a break-up really is something totally distant and I don’t want to cross everything out straight away” (R5: Alicja).

In both cases, the feelings that unite the partners are treated as true love, a kind of bond that does not pass away and is independent of the person’s will. The emergence of feelings towards the partner and commitment to the relationship often progresses beyond the control of the female respondents, which often led to losing oneself in the relationship, as the next emerging theme shows.

Staying in the relationship at all costs

The initial idealisation of the relationship and the persistence of a state of infatuation or infatuation led the respondents to overlook their partner’s neg-

ative behaviours and faults. It also became a reason for invalidating the accompanying feelings, which were relegated to the background at the expense of their well-being. The observation of their partner's lack of commitment to the relationship became a source of frustration and growing disappointment. Such a situation of ongoing unmet emotional needs could last for several or even several months before the thought of ending the relationship entered some teenage girls' minds. Each of the girls interviewed believed that somehow it could be saved after all.

Magda is a middle school student, who has experienced a lack of commitment from her partners and a lack of communication in relationships. The girl talks about repairing the relationship, which in the case of her relationship means changing the partner's behavior and his greater involvement in meeting emotional needs. In Alicja's case, it is about maintaining a relationship that has to be fought for.

"everyone was simply urging me at the time that 'Magda, it's no use, break up with him, because it'll be the same again and you'll get even more tired, break up sooner, because later it'll be too late for you and you'll just have it worse', and I said at the time that 'no, that somehow it can be saved after all', so it was the same again, even though I got run over once, I kept on trying to fix things somehow and I wanted to see him again" (R4: Magda).

Sacrificing oneself for the relationship, trying to maintain it even at the cost of giving up important aspects in one's life while it does not meet expectations was not unusual among female respondents. Milena straightforwardly states that she "gave everything from herself".

"I gave everything of myself and tried to change him, and he continued with his beliefs and this philosophy of abnormality" (R1: Milena).

Magda but also Alicja believe that their relationship will last and did not accept the thought that the relationship could end. It seems that Magda believed in a romantic vision of love that is able (also with the participation of partners) to overcome obstacles and be long-lasting.

“after all, it has to go on and nothing can go wrong, because that’s what I thought before, that it just has to go on and how it – there’s no option for it to end” (R4: Magda).

“I’d rather get to know one person and fight for that one person than get to know fifty people and actually keep coming back to the same point all the time as with that first person” (R5: Alicja).

Importantly, most of the female respondents had gone back to their partners at least once. Milena, Natalia, Beata – other respondents also talked about “giving a (second) chance”. Their inner belief in the need to maintain the relationship was a sign of commitment to the relationship. In spite of the emotions experienced, the respondents took action to maintain the relationship in spite of themselves. When Alicja tried to convince her boyfriend to stay together and negotiated a postponement of the moment of separation she was undertaking an unrequited fight for the other person. In this sense, the expression, used by Alicja (“quiet marriage”) is understood as a commitment to maintain the relationship at all costs. The dominant motif in the respondent’s narrative of persistence in the relationship despite experiencing many difficulties evokes the association with a traditional marriage that lasts until the “grave” – is a kind of sacrifice, but also a manifestation of the power of love that “moves mountains”. Not only is the girl convinced that the couple’s bond is guaranteed to bring the couple back together and overcome any adversity, but she also believes that the continuation of her relationship with her boyfriend is a matter of intervention by a higher power.

“Every single time we broke up, something happened that life always just put us in, in some stupid situation, something was so literally ridiculous for it to happen, and yet it happened anyway” (R5: Alicja).

Her prediction of a happy history together was based on magical thinking. The respondent believed that their relationship survived in spite of break-ups and in spite of other people’s predictions, because the partners are destined for each other. The girl portrayed their successive returns to each other as something extraordinary, an improbable coincidence, but also as work-

ing against the human malice or envy that was supposed to drive them apart, but paradoxically brought them together again, because every single time we parted, something happened that always life just put us together.

The pattern of breakups and returns was also experienced by Beata, as if unknowingly becoming a couple, when the emotions after the breakup weakened and there was some warm feeling towards the boy again. The girl returned to the boy three times and deliberately avoided him so that the circumstances would not be conducive to establishing a relationship again.

“Then he wrote again, I wrote back and we were together again [...]. and we were just talking and it just so happened that we got back together again” (R6: Beata).

Actions taken towards the relationship

The declaration of remaining in a relationship is followed by specific actions taken by the respondents. The behavioral aspect of the functioning of the myths of romantic love was expressed in the obligation to work on the relationship and attempts to maintain it. The partners fit into the roles of specialists in managing emotions and communication in the relationship and vigilant guardians standing in constant readiness to save the relationship at any cost.

Difficulties occurring in an intimate relationship were the central theme of most narratives revealed by the female respondents. The problems indicated by the girls generally concerned the disregard of their emotional needs and the lack of commitment of their partners to the relationship. What they had in common was their shared sense of responsibility for shaping the relationship and developing feelings between partners. The respondents hoped to effectively change their partner – their feelings (Alicja referred to her partner as a “block of ice”) and behaviour (giving more attention to their partner – Beata, openly discussing problems in the relationship – Magda). The girls interviewed took numerous actions to ensure the relationship lasted and spoke of the aforementioned “saving” and “fighting” for the relationship, often at all costs. This took various forms, from monitoring the condition of the relationship, to being the initiator of conversations to resolve problems,

to taking care of the emotional aspect of the relationship, to trying to change her partner's behaviour or ignoring the difficult ones.

Love, even if one-sided, was supposed to be a sufficient condition to reactivate the relationship:

“if they love this person, it is possible to make everything work out and get along with this person” (R5: Alicja).

Alicja, it seems, is convinced that her feelings for her partner are able to solve many problems because they are unique and real. Alicja's consistency and determination to stay in the relationship led her to decide not to give up on the intimate relationship even in the face of revealing problems. The respondent declared that she would not leave her partner without a significant reason, and such a reason did not turn out to be her boyfriend's double betrayal. The girl tried to forgive him. Saving the relationship seems to her to be a moral obligation and walking away from her partner something that would be a “shortcut”.

Subsequent conversations undertaken, setting up meetings, alleviating conflicts, e.g. by giving up behaviours that bothered the partners, making excuses for them, blaming themselves or others are examples of what the respondents did to bring the relationship back to a state where they felt happy. It was not always possible, it even caused a number of negative consequences in the form of frustration, lower self-esteem of the respondents or a sense of wasting time. In the case of Magda, the experience of intimate relationships resulted in the feeling that:

“something is wrong with me” (R4: Magda).

The repeated remarks of the partners not to bother with problems all the time, deprived the girl of self-confidence. In the case of Beata, attempts to attract the partner's attention also ended with the statement that

“I am not that important to him” (R6: Beata).

In turn, Milena saw in her relationship only a source of lost opportunities. Making the relationship the center of one's life along with gaining experience by the respondents was treated as a mistake.

Losing oneself in a relationship

The willingness to make sacrifices in order to maintain the relationship most often lasted as long as the feeling persisted. Ending the relationship and emotionally coping with the break-up led to a revision of their own behaviour and beliefs. Most of the female respondents felt that losing themselves completely in the relationship was a threat to their autonomy and independence. This is most clearly reflected in a quote from one girl who stated:

“Although I didn't demand too much from him either, because I said, I'm important, friends are important, because you know, you can't make everything, the whole world around one person, because then you'll lose everyone around you” (R2: Judyta).

Judyta saw the downsides of losing herself completely in her partner and becoming dependent on him: the loss of friends and loved ones, and consequently also social isolation or the experience of loneliness after the relationship ended. The respondent was particularly careful to maintain her own space of self-realisation and activity by maintaining the boundary between being a couple and a separate individual, despite doing activities together. Importantly, however, Judyta already had experience of being in several relationships and was aware that such friendships could end.

“Losing oneself in a relationship”, sacrificing oneself for one's partner, and spending every free moment with him were regarded by most of the female respondents as a mistake they should be wary of when forming another relationship. For example, Milena spoke about it as follows:

“It seems to me to trust each other and for everyone to have a life outside this relationship. That, in my opinion, is probably the most important thing. [...] To trust and for everyone to have their own life outside of this relationship. And their private life. [...]. Exactly, because if you don't have this private life, you lose eve-

rything. You lose your personality, things. Well, that's it – you also have to have things that are not connected to that person, you can't just have only that relationship in your life. Also have friends, passions” (R1: Milena).

What is interesting, however, the refusal to sacrifice for a partner mainly concerns not getting rid of interests, free time and having friends. However, none of the respondents mentions the lack of balance in making efforts for the relationship.

Conclusion

What emerges from the narratives of the female respondents is a picture of love, which is treated as a powerful force, at times threatening and dangerous, being a source of suffering, at other times capable of overcoming the greatest obstacles. The strength of the emotional bond formed between the partners and the respondents' sense of responsibility for maintaining the relationship meant that many difficult situations occurred before the relationship broke down and, in some cases, the emotional commitment continued even after the relationship ended, not without impact on the psychological well-being, self-esteem, and mood of the girls surveyed.

The topics emerging from the narration of the respondents are related to the culturally sustained belief in the possibility of finding an “ideal partner” and the romantically woven faith in “true love” that can exist with the right partner and whose strength is able to overcome any difficulties. This image of love is confronted with its true face, in which the interests, needs and interests of the partners are not always the same. Believing in the myths of romantic love deprives the respondent of the ability to accurately assess the relationship, they are the reason to invalidate the states and emotions experienced in the relationship and are the source of the experienced disappointment. Perseverance in a relationship is therefore associated with a systematic effort for the relationship, which in the case of the surveyed girls is mainly on their side.

Discussion

Considering the quotations and their interpretations cited in the analyses, it can be concluded that nowadays, the romantic vision of love is changing and mixing with other interpretive frameworks for understanding one's experiences and making meanings of them.

The model of romantic love suggests to its audience "a set of socially shared beliefs about the supposedly true nature of love" (Yela, 2003, p. 264). The myths, stereotypes and cultural gender roles that occur within it fuel the imagination of the audience, thus equipping them with almost ready-made "scenarios of loving and being loved" (Cubells-Serra et al., 2021, p. 2). These beliefs then influence their expectations and behaviours when they engage with a potential romantic partner (Knee & Bush, 2008). What can be noticed when analyzing the narrations of the respondents is that the myths of romantic love do not reveal themselves directly in a typical form, but are more nuanced, they are revealed indirectly, most often they are mixed with other models of love, but they have an impact on the behavior of young people and their persistence in emotional relationships.

Romantic beliefs about love can motivate adolescent girls to maintain relationships, which was not always for their psychological well-being. Myths about the omnipotence of love, the other half and blind love, however, became weaker and weaker with the acquisition of difficult experiences. The belief that the partners were destined for each other had certain consequences – not ending the relationship, even in the face of difficult experiences, affected mental health. Research on the beliefs of adolescents, but also adults, shows that belief in romantic myths can be a source of unequal status between partners in an intimate relationship, different distribution of rights and responsibilities attributed to them, and even violence experienced (Borrajó et al., 2015; Masanet et al., 2018; Nava-Reyes et al., 2018; Cava et al., 2020; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2022).

When we look at the narratives of the girls studied, we can see that the myths about romantic love are changing, making them more relevant to the challenges of the present day. The myth of the other half, for example, revealed itself in terms of the search for the perfect partner, but in terms of similarity of psychological characteristics, shared interests or shared values.

The compatibility of partners in a relationship seems to be derived from the spiritual complementation postulated by romanticism based on emotional and “mystical” categories (Dembek, 2011). The myth of amorous omnipotence and blind love, on the other hand, reveals only the initial independence of feelings against the will of the individual, who becomes active and is able to arouse reciprocation of feelings in the other person and maintain them. It can be said that the re-respondents “managed” their behaviour and their relationship with their partner in such a way as to evoke certain feelings in them and make them act in a certain way (Dembek, 2011).

It may also be that the “quiet marriage” referred to by one respondent, although grounded in the ideal of romantic love, alludes to an oppositional model of love as work. As Illouz’s research shows, people can simultaneously use a romantic as well as a realist interpretive frame for their own love experiences, especially as contemporary communicative practices about love are realised within different discourses. For example, Gdula (2009), analysing the advice literature, distinguishes three expert discourses: traditional, utilitarian and utopian. Each of them equips the imagination of the audience with different visions of the intimate relationship, recommended ways in which its participants function and ways of justifying the need to enter into/sustain it. Romantic love thus co-occurs with the experience of “rational, utilitarian and worked-out” love, which corresponds to the model of love as work. The relationship is treated as a sphere of intentional activities, such as building, investing, negotiating, with the aim of ensuring its permanence and satisfaction for both partners. Respondents sought to improve the functioning of the relationship, which may have been related to their image of the relationship as an area for work. Respondents’ diagnoses of what was working and what was not working and needed to be worked on may have been based on the culturally popular therapeutic discourse (Illouz, 1997; 2010; 2016).

The analyses conducted provide insights into how belief in myths about romantic love impinges on perceptions of relationships and interpretations of their own experiences among young girls. In line with previous research reports, romanticising relationships can carry negative consequences for young people’s health and expose them to violence. The power of commitment motivated by the belief in “true” love may go beyond the ability of adolescents to bear the relationship emotionally, becoming a source of difficult

emotions. While the literature indicates that adolescents' commitment to relationships is weaker than that seen in young adults (Sumter, Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), the present analyses indicate the opposite. It may be that some adolescents manifest a strong or overly strong commitment to remain in the relationship, idealising their relationship or the very idea of affectionate relationships, which stops them from ending relationships that do not serve their mental health.

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