

# ■ The teenage love: Do Spanish early-middle adolescents believe in the romantic love?

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## Abstract

Romantic beliefs are associated to attachment anxiety, acceptability of abusive relationships and justification of violent behavior. Adolescence is a crucial stage for the consolidation of identity. The aim of this study is to analyze the myths of romantic love and examine gender differences among 448 Spanish early-middle adolescents ( $M = 12.92$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ) that were attending the first and second year of the Spanish secondary education. The Myths, Fallacies and Misconceptions about Romantic Love Scale by Luzón et al. (2011) was administered in the classrooms during tutoring hours and was supervised by a group of psychologists. Results showed that out of the total of 18 myths of romantic love in the evaluation, the average number that the adolescents said they believed in was 9.03 ( $SD = 3.13$ ). The highest scores were obtained in factors named "Love implies possession and exclusivity" and "True love is predestined". The better-half myth, the myth of jealousy and the idea of love between couples is the fundamental reason behind the existence were the most frequent beliefs. Statistically significant gender differences were found. Adolescent males reported that they believed in a higher number of myths of romantic love and obtained the highest percentages in most beliefs in myths. Findings show shows that biases and fallacies related to romantic love have already been formed in early adolescence and that appears differentially according to gender. These results can be useful in the planning and design of preventive programs.

*Keywords: Romantic love beliefs, adolescence, teen dating violence, gender differences.*

## Resumen

*El amor adolescente: ¿Creen los adolescentes españoles en el amor romántico? Las creencias románticas están asociadas al apego ansioso, la aceptación de las relaciones abusivas y la justificación de la conducta violenta. La adolescencia es una etapa crucial para la consolidación de la identidad. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar los mitos del amor romántico y examinar las diferencias de género en 448 adolescentes españoles tempranos-medios ( $M = 12,92$ ;  $DT = 0,85$ ) que cursaban primer y segundo año de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. Se administró la Escala de mitos, falacias y conceptos erróneos sobre el amor romántico de Luzón et al. (2011) en las aulas. Los resultados mostraron que, del total de 18 mitos de amor romántico evaluados, el número promedio en el que los adolescentes dijeron creer fue de 9,03 ( $DT = 3,13$ ). Las puntuaciones más altas se obtuvieron en los factores denominados "El amor implica posesión y exclusividad" y "El verdadero amor está predestinado". El mito de la media naranja, el mito de los celos y la idea de que el amor entre parejas es la razón fundamental de la existencia fueron las creencias más frecuentes. Se encontraron diferencias de género estadísticamente significativas. Los adolescentes varones informaron que creían en un mayor número de mitos de amor romántico y obtuvieron los porcentajes más altos en la mayoría de mitos. Los resultados muestran que los prejuicios y falacias relacionados con el amor romántico ya se han formado en la adolescencia temprana y eso aparece de manera diferencial según el género. Estos hallazgos pueden ser útiles en la planificación y diseño de programas preventivos.*

*Palabras clave: amor romántico, creencias, adolescencia, violencia en el noviazgo adolescente, diferencias de género.*

## Introduction

The scientific study of love involves serious difficulties due to the confusion regarding the core concept and consequently the complexity of assessing it (Sangrador, 1993). The myths of romantic love have developed over the years since the pioneering study by Lantz et al. (1973). The study by Yela (2003) has been the classification more

accepted and up-to-date described. The nature of love is associated with its representation in history and culture. New relationship models have appeared over time (Pérez et al.2008) but the main myths regarding jealousy, omnipotence of love and the better-half continue to appeared in different studies (Bosch et al., 2019; Chocarro de Luis & Ortuño, 2018; Luengo & Rodríguez, 2009; Marcos et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2015).

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The experience of love is latent in cognitions, emotions and behaviors (Lamy, 2016). Romantic beliefs are associated to attachment anxiety, acceptability of abusive relationships and justification of violent behavior (Bajoghli et al., 2017; Sandberg et al., 2019). Different studies have demonstrated that these ideas increase young people's vulnerability to both offline dating violence (Papp et al., 2017) and cyber dating violence (Cava et al., 2020; Stonard et al., 2017).

The teenage love is different to the love experiences of the young people or adults (Giordano et al., 2010; Gómez-López et al., 2019) and early adolescence is a crucial stage for the consolidation of identity (Kerpelman et al., 2012). Moreover, the literature shows gender differences that can be explained by the different experience of the socialization of love since their childhoods (De Meyer et al., 2017). For example, a recent study analyzed the forums discussing a Spanish television series and it evaluated the viewers' opinions about the behavior of certain characters. The authors of the study observed that characteristics such as submission and guilt were attributed to the female character, whilst traits such as aggression and domination were attributed to the male character (Masanet et al., 2018).

The aim of this study is analyze if Spanish early-middle adolescents have beliefs about romantic love half a century after those first studies, describe what they are and examine if there are differences between adolescent males y females.

## Method

### Participants

The inclusion criteria were to be enroll in school and to be attend the first or second year of the Spanish secondary education. A total sample consisted of 448 Spanish adolescents (225 males and 223 females) aged between 12 and 16 ( $M = 12.92$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ). The 80.4% of whom were early adolescents (12-13 years old). In general, they had a medium socioeconomic status, lived in urban areas and were attending at different public (62.3%) and charter (37.7%) schools of the city.

### Measurements

The *Myths, Fallacies and Misconceptions about Romantic Love Scale* (Escala de Mitos, Falacias y Creencias Erróneas acerca del ideal de amor romántico by Luzón et al., 2011) was taken from an 18-item questionnaire with an ipsative response format. Adolescents had to choose between two statements, one of which was a myth of romantic love. The myths are divided into 4 factors: love conquers all (6 items), true love is predestined (5 items), love is the most important thing in life and requires total dedication (5 items), and love implies possession and exclusivity (2 items). The internal consistency of the total scale was of .72. A Cronbach's Alpha of .70 was obtained with this sample.

### Procedure

The project was requested by the City Council with the of evaluating some risk factors for dating violence among around 600 adolescents and designing public prevention strategies. The city's Health Sector Coordinating Council, a body that represents the main social agents: Chiefs Medical Officers at the health centers, heads of schools, parents' association representatives, and health technicians and technicians in education, approved the project and established the ethical procedure of information to participants. The educational centers sent a letter to the parents of the adolescents explaining the nature of the project and

requesting passive parental consent. A group of psychologists supervised the completion of the surveys (75 minutes) in the classrooms during tutoring hours and ensured privacy. Pencil and paper were used, the confidentiality was ensured with anonymous surveys.

### Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and frequency (percentages) were calculated in order to analyze the myths of romantic love. In turn, a procedure for the rescaling ( $Y = ((X - X_{min}) / X_{range}) * 10$ ) of factors of the romantic love myths scale was performed because of the items that have different lower and upper values. Differences between the responses of each gender were analyzed using the t-test and Cohen's d effect sizes (continuous variables: total scores) as well as the chi-square and Cramer's V (dichotomous variables: items).

## Results

### *Description of the myths of romantic love among adolescents*

Out of the total of 18 myths of romantic love in the evaluation, the average number that the adolescents said they believed in was 9.03 ( $SD = 3.13$ ). On the other hand, the highest scores were obtained in of rescaled factors 4 and 2, named "Love implies possession and exclusivity" and "True love is predestined", respectively (see Table 1).

A frequency analysis indicated that more than 30% of the adolescents selected a myth-based belief instead of the myth-free response option. Specifically, in 7 out 18 myths, over 60% of the adolescents selected the myth-based belief. The better-half myth, the myth of jealousy and the idea of love between couples is the fundamental reason behind the existence were the most frequent beliefs (see Table 2).

### *Gender differences in myths of romantic love*

There were statistically significant differences between adolescent males and females in the total scale score ( $p = .001$ ), in factors 1 ("Love conquers all") ( $p = .008$ ) and 3 ("Love is the most important thing in life and requires total dedication") ( $p = .001$ ). Adolescent males reported that they believed in a higher number of myths of romantic love (see Table 1). These differences had a small-to-moderate effect size of between 0.262 and 0.465.

Statistically significant gender differences were observed in the frequency analysis in half of the evaluated myths: 2 myths in factor 1, 1 myth in factor 2, 4 myths in factor 3, and 1 myth in factor 4. Adolescent males obtained the highest percentages in these beliefs in myths. The greatest differences were found in: "Understanding love as depersonalization" ( $p = .001$ ,  $V = 0.259$ ), "True love forgives all" ( $p = .001$ ,  $V = 0.205$ ) and "The fallacy of complete surrender" ( $p = .001$ ,  $V = 0.176$ ) (see Table 2). The better-half myth and the myth of jealousy were believed by adolescent males and females with a similar percentage. Adolescent females obtained higher percentage in the omnipotence myth and the idea of opposites attract and understand each other. However, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in these beliefs in myths.

## Discussion

Love is a social construction that has varied throughout history. The concept of the myths of romantic love is widely accepted. For example, Lantz et al. (1973), Yela (2003) and Pérez et al. (2008) defined it as the distorted beliefs about the nature of love which form

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the number of myths of romantic love and analysis of the gender differences (t-test and Cohen's d)

	Total sample (N = 448)		Adolescent males (n = 225)		Adolescent females (n = 223)		t (p)	d
	M (SD)	M (SD) Rescaled variable	M	SD	M	SD		
Group 1: Love conquers all (0-6 points)	2.69 (1.35)	4.49 (2.24)	2.87	1.33	2.52	1.34	2.673 (.008)	0.262 (0.076; 0.448)
Group 2: True love is predestined (0-5 points)	2.62 (1.10)	5.23 (2.21)	2.60	1.15	2.64	1.05	-0.369 (.712)	-0.036 (-0.221; 0.149)
Group 3: Love is the most important thing in life and requires total dedication (0-5 points)	2.42 (1.44)	4.84 (2.88)	2.76	1.37	2.08	1.43	5.002 (≤.001)	0.485 (0.297; 0.673)
Group 4: Love implies possession and exclusivity (0-2 points)	1.28 (0.73)	6.38 (3.64)	1.32	0.75	1.23	0.71	1.261 (.208)	0.123 (-0.062; 0.308)
Total scale (0-18 points)			9.55	3.00	8.49	3.18	3.411 (.001)	0.342 (0.156; 0.529)

Table 2. Frequency analysis of romantic love myths and analysis of gender differences (Chi-square test and Cramér's V)

	Total sample (N = 448) % myth believers	Adolescent males (n = 225) % myth believers	Adolescent females (n = 223) % myth believers	Chi2 (p)	V
Group 1: Love conquers all					
Fallacy of being changed by love	62.7	67.3	59.3	2.922 (.087)	0.082
Normalization of conflict	40.6	46.4	33.5	7.398 (.007)	0.132
Compatibility between love and abuse	35.1	36.3	31.9	0.913 (.339)	0.046
True love forgives all	34.7	44.7	25.1	18.060 (≤.001)	0.205
Omnipotence myth	61.8	59.7	64.7	1.113 (.291)	0.051
Opposites attract and understand each other	34.5	33.6	34.9	0.076 (.786)	0.013
Group 2: True love is predestined					
Better-half myth	74.7	74.2	74.4	0.003 (.960)	0.002
Emotional reasoning	45.9	46.3	46	0.003 (.959)	0.003
Belief that there is only one true love in life	43.8	46.5	41.8	0.987 (.320)	0.048
Eternal passion myth	42	46.8	37.9	3.495 (.062)	0.090
Myth of complementarity	45.5	54.4	37.4	12.357 (≤.001)	0.170
Group 3: Love is the most important thing in life and requires total dedication					
Giving up privacy for love	43.3	44.4	41.2	0.463 (.496)	0.033
Love between couples is the fundamental reason for existence	65.5	70.1	60.9	3.985 (.046)	0.096
Fallacy of complete surrender	52.3	60.9	43.4	13.153 (≤.001)	0.176
Understanding love as depersonalization	33.8	46.1	21.6	28.741 (≤.001)	0.259
The other has the power of my own happiness	48.4	56	40.8	9.886 (.002)	0.152
Group 4: Love implies possession and exclusivity					
Myth of jealousy	66.6	66.2	66.7	0.011 (.918)	0.005
Marriage myth	61.3	65.9	56.5	4.043 (.044)	0.097

the rigid and unrealistic way in which we understand love. It should be expected that the meaning of love guides people on how to love. Therefore, it is essential to deepen the dynamics that occur at adolescence so as to improve the effectiveness of preventive programs.

Two pioneering studies, by Barrón et al. (1999) and Ferrer et al. (2010), demonstrated that myths of romantic love could still be found in a representative sample of the Spanish population. Ten years ago, the most frequent myths were the belief that love conquers all and the

belief that one needs to have a partner in order to be happy. The main beliefs of the teens evaluated in our study were based around the ideas that love is the reason for existence, that there is someone predestined for everyone and that jealousy is a demonstration of love. In cognitive psychology, the experiments of Trémolière and Djeriouat (2019) suggested that love is not exactly blind. The transmission of romantic ideas through socialization creates blueprints and scripts that give existence meaning and generate cognitive biases which have a lot of implications in life, especially among young people. The first of the teens' beliefs reveals the centrality of love at their developmental stage and highlights the sacrifices and concessions that they would be willing to make in order to gain or maintain this important aspect in their lives. In this regard, the recent study by Bosch et al. (2019) observed that almost 90% of university students would change their city, job (60.77%) or life plans (50%) for love. A second point is that the better-half myth which has appeared in previous studies, including that of Rodríguez et al. (2015), promotes a traditional linking model based on fusion and complementarity, as described by Luengo et al. (2009). Lastly, the myth of jealousy is possibly the one which has been investigated the most, due to its close relationship with teen dating violence (Giordano et al., 2010). As indicated by Chocarro de Luis et al. (2018), normalizing jealousy as an indicator of protection in relationships can lead to the acceptance of coercion strategies such as control, domination or emotional blackmail. On the other hand, in our study adolescent males have more myths of romantic love and more frequently than adolescent females. Gender differences have been described in other studies such as De Meyer et al. (2017) or Marcos et al. (2020). This findings can probably be explained because the man has a relevant role in the content of the myths. In other words, romantic beliefs highlight the power that a man has in the love context.

Ultimately, literature, philosophy and other fields of the humanities have, for a long time, been involved in answering the question of "What is love?" but there is still no clear answer to the question of why some people continue to maintain harmful romantic beliefs despite the efforts made to provide education on matters of equality. Different theoretical approaches have emphasized the importance of socialization processes in the development and maintenance of beliefs (Giordano et al., 2010); others highlight the importance of evaluating other processes which are more closely related to the person and the context of love-based relationships at a certain stage of maturity (Bajoghli et al., 2017). Due to the limitations of a descriptive study, this study did not aim to find out the causes of the myths of romantic love. However, it does allow us to conclude that adolescents are still a group at risk for teen dating violence currently. Specifically, our study shows that biases and fallacies related to romantic love have already been formed in early adolescence (10-13 years old) and that appears differentially according to gender (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998). These results can be useful in the planning and design of preventive programs. They suggest that health education related to interpersonal relationships should begin from childhood and should include the family. The content focus should address to identify distorted ideas about love and learn healthy relationship dynamics.

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ERP and RBA conceived of the presented idea and coordinated the project, ERP and CGG processed the data, performed the statisti-

cal analysis and the interpretation of the results, ERP wrote the manuscript with the support from RBA, RBA and MDGLL verified the analytical methods and supervising the final manuscript.

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