

TO LOVE AND BE LOVED IS TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN: A GENDERED BALANCING ACT

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ways in which everyday experiences of gender shape the ways that people prefer to receive and distribute love and care. I draw upon a qualitative interview with a 20-year-old queer woman that I will refer to as 'A', in which I analyze how gendered socialization influenced her perceptions of love and care throughout her life. We speak to emotionality, relationship experiences and their impacts on her understanding of love, and family/societal expectations. There is an early rejection of femininity from the participant, and through queer experience and exposure, she began to reclaim this femininity as a source of empowerment, and she reinterpreted love and care as relational rather than performative. This study aims to show how gender operates as a framework in which people reshape the meanings of love and care in their lives.

“LOVING SOMEONE, TO A, REQUIRES KNOWING WHO THEY ARE, RECOGNIZING THEIR PREFERENCES, AND PARTICIPATING IN AN EQUITABLE EXCHANGE OF CARE. THIS SHIFT IS ALSO EVIDENT IN HER REFLECTIONS ON LOVE LANGUAGES.”

How might people's everyday experiences of gender shape the ways that they understand and practice love and care? This is the overall research question I aimed to answer in the interview I conducted. I found that feminist scholars have long shown that gender norms shape not only behaviour, but also their perceived expectations of emotional expression and intimacy. We can see that emotional expression has historically been categorized as feminine, while restraint is reserved for masculinity. These norms we live with produce unfair

expectations of who is deemed responsible for taking on emotional labour and vulnerability. In this way, love is shaped by specific ideals of power, gender and love.

During this research, I would argue that A's discussion with me reveals the gendered nature of socialization as someone growing up in a more recent era. I also argue that this socialization produces resistance to care, guardedness and hyper-independence. The experiences she has had display the ability of queer relationships in relation to destabilizing heteronormative ideals. Through the interview, we speak about childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and how love and care were a balancing concept shaped by norms, and her attempt to unlearn them.

My research participant 'A' is a 20-year-old woman who is attracted to both men and women, who has experiences of growth and difference in terms of receiving and practicing love and care. A had a gendered upbringing, raised in Sherwood Park, Alberta, and explored how growing up being a girl, with a sister, was challenging within the family unit and also out in the community. Femininity was devalued when she was growing up by her father, and she spoke about how:

“It was... clear... more masculine activities were more valued, whereas feminine was less valued. And I think that changed how I, like, accept love. Um, because I kind of rejected, like, being taken care of in any kind of way, like, I... it kind of made me hyper-independent, and I didn't want anyone to help me, because that's weak, and that's, like, feminine, and I rejected any help or any sort of love or care from romantic partners.”

To me, this quote shows how A has internalized these gendered values, in which masculinity is associated with pride and capability while femininity is associated with dependence and weakness. Reflecting on the impulse of rejection to help as a feminine person has unveiled how this gendered socialization has shaped her difficulty receiving care and her overall emotional habits. This is helpful for my research question, as it highlights the structure of gender norms and how it produces the terms in which emotions and love are understood overall.

Her reflections on how masculine praise and feminine shame have shaped her ability to receive and distribute love and care are extremely valuable. This shows an internalization of shame and fear to be perceived as traits commonly associated with femininity through stereotypes, such as weakness, submissiveness, illiteracy, uninformedness and incapability. To avoid these assumptions, she turned

to masculinity to help her avoid confrontation from others who would deem her as too feminine. By doing this, she worked hard to resist femininity and embrace masculinity through learning and participating in sports that are stereotypically associated with men/boys, and appreciated the categorization from others as a 'tomboy', which helped establish her as a 'strong, independent and capable' person in her own mind and to those around her. As she established an early investment in masculinity, A also reshaped her understanding of love and care. She learned to see strength as a way to be self-sufficient and develop hyper-independence. This impacted the increase in resistance to love and care, being threatening or undesirable. There is a gendered resistance to feminine presentation, which turns into an emotional type of resistance to vulnerability in her relationships (platonic and romantic).

As A grew into a late teenager, she dated a girl for the first time. Her thoughts on this are interesting and have implications for self-discovery:

"I think what changed is I dated a girl, and so it was less like, I don't want a man doing things for me, it was like, actually, I like when she does things for me. And it's, like, helping me, it's, like, an act of service, because it wasn't, like, I can do it myself, I don't need a man, it was just like, actually, I'd like to be loved in this way. So, I think now I can, like, accept that kind of love from people, and it feels good. It's great."

This quote reflects on A's experience in a queer relationship and how it dismantled her imposed heteronormative assumptions. Since there was no stereotypical partner assigned a male/giver role, care was separated from power. There is a real intrigue here, discussing her point of growth and self-actualization. Through her experience in a relationship with a woman, she felt she was able to let down her barriers that prevented the binary of heteronormative expectations of relationships and gender roles, or man/woman relationships and their stereotypical roles. Now that they were both identifying as the same gender, she felt they could give and receive love and care equitably, and she realized it could be like this in any of her future relationships (romantic and platonic). She spoke to things in this discovery like "Neither of us needs a man... it doesn't have anything to do with someone's a man, someone's a woman.", and realizing things like "Actually, I like when she does things for me." Because of this, she feels better equipped to be in a healthy relationship now to acknowledge and accept support from her partner, regardless of their identity. Now, care is more relational instead of gender-coded.

Next in the interview was a section that focused on her reclaiming femininity as a form of empowerment. A key point she made is that "the way to reject stereotypes isn't to reject being a woman, it's to embrace being a woman." She acknowledges that this remains an ongoing tension in her life, and she still must remind herself that accepting care does not make her inferior. This shift also connects to her growing understanding of love languages. Through learning about physical touch, acts of service, words of affirmation, gift giving, and quality time, A began to articulate the forms of affection that feel most meaningful to her. She explained, "I think showing up, remembering, and knowing them is... I don't know how to show love," emphasizing that actions speak louder than words. Her preference for acts of service reflects a reworking of earlier gendered messages where she once rejected help as feminine and therefore weak; she now interprets certain actions as intentional care.

A's lived experiences of gender and relationships have therefore involved a shift from rejecting femininity to embracing it, which reshaped how she understands relational care. Loving someone, to A, requires knowing who they are, recognizing their preferences, and participating in an equitable exchange of care. This shift is also evident in her reflections on love languages. As she explained, "I think that I don't always align with words of affirmation as much. Just 'cause I often feel like actions speak louder than words... people can say that they love you, and that you're so beautiful, and whatever, and praise all they want, but what matters is kind of what they do." Her emphasis on action challenges the gendered stereotype that women should be highly responsive to verbal affection, and instead, reflects her growing belief that care is demonstrated through consistency and intentional behaviour. Since birth, A has experienced love as something that requires constant negotiation within gendered expectations, and she emphasized the importance of consciously educating future generations to resist harmful stereotypes and foster more equitable forms of care. When speaking about how gender, love and care have shifted through their life, A gives insight into how:

"I think it's really a balancing act that I'll probably be... balancing my whole life, and that's kind of a result of... stereotypes, gender stereotypes that you kind of socialize with since you were out of the womb, I mean, as soon as you're born, people start treating you based on your gender. Um, so... yeah, I think it's a balance of, like, rejecting them and rejecting being a woman and embracing being a woman."

A's description of love as a lifelong balancing act reflects the tension between resisting gender stereotypes and reclaiming femininity on her own terms. This tension reveals how deeply gender expectations structure emotional expression, even when individuals actively work to unlearn them. The implications show that nobody is perfect, and even though you have the best of intentions, it is common to slip up or recognize in yourself that you may be doing more harm than good. What is important is that you come to be able to recognize that, and find a balance of letting your true identity come to light while resisting societal pressures. Emotional safety is a playing factor in this as well, and learning what it means to feel emotionally safe because of your experience of gender. A states that in order to make others and help yourself to become emotionally vulnerable/safe in friendly and romantic relationships, you must use your ears! "I think actively listening instead of just, like, thinking about what you're going to say next to defend whatever you're talking about is super important, and something that I need to work on, and... but that I've been, like, lucky enough to experience, just like feeling heard, and...understood."

"A'S DESCRIPTION OF LOVE AS A LIFELONG BALANCING ACT REFLECTS THE TENSION BETWEEN RESISTING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND RECLAIMING FEMININITY ON HER OWN TERMS. THIS TENSION REVEALS HOW DEEPLY GENDER EXPECTATIONS STRUCTURE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION, EVEN WHEN INDIVIDUALS ACTIVELY WORK TO UNLEARN THEM."

This internalization of femininity as inferior has complicated her relationships up until now. Love as hyper-independence and a real resistance to care was born of this. The gendered nature of power systems and dynamics is a present and obvious factors of determination that lead A to passively internalize these beliefs. This resistance is due to the unequal distribution of domestic and emotional labour employed onto women in our Western society. The emotional labour expected from feminized people and groups is asymmetrical to what they receive. Power is inherently masculinized, and therefore the problem, and so often why women such as A are hesitant to present femininity. It can feel like giving into the narrative and perpetuating the stereotype of the

woman as a nurturing caretaker that (quite frankly) is expected of them to submit to their masculine 'superior' and follow their lead. This is why we so often see uproar when a young boy presents with 'feminine' interests or characteristics. We can see how it is viewed by society (often unknowingly and passively) that being interested in 'so-called' feminine hobbies, or garments, is to 'take away' from their identity as a man. Is it not so blatantly obvious when we can see the same thing in its inverse; girls or young women being interested in 'so-called' masculine hobbies, or garments, is to 'add' to their identity as a person. It is viewed as a strength to want to be more masculine, or be tougher, or less emotionally intelligent. This points me to my discussion on uncomfortability. In this process, I can take away and support the claim that being uncomfortable is to grow, and that emotional intellect is one of those things that can be uncomfortable. To so many masculinized people, they are taught to 'be a man', or 'toughen up' when they become emotional, when in reality, this is to avoid discomfort. So maybe, we can now understand that to be emotional is to accept growth, and to accept growth is to acknowledge our coexistence with each other as human beings is imperfect. Gender identity, therefore, does impact how we choose to receive love and care as much as how we distribute it. We internalize stereotypes enforced by broader society and systems of power, we take those feelings into future relationships (intimate and platonic), and deal with the consequences of confusion in terms of our own identities. To further complicate this, it impacts our community just as much as our community impacts us.

Intentional care and calm love are something seen to be of desire in adulthood now, and in order to navigate a gendered world and then a relationship on top, you must hold those around you accountable. To close the interview out, we talk about how her perspectives have changed over her life, and how that has impacted the way she is able to distribute and receive love and care. She says that:

"I think the way I dealt with gender stereotypes was to really reject femininity growing up... around the end of high school... I kind of realized that being a girl is awesome... and that doesn't make me less of a person... To understand that... to reject those stereotypes isn't to reject being a woman, is to embrace being a woman and show that you can be a woman and still be a strong independent person... And that doesn't make you inferior... flipping the script from... erasing my femininity to embracing it and using it as, like, an

empowering thing, like... being proud to be a girl, and instead of neglecting that part of myself, and rejecting that part of myself.”

I see a reframing of femininity as empowerment. There is a shift here that is meaningful in how it expands the range of care A felt able to accept. This allowed her to enter relationships with a reciprocal and vulnerable mindset, and we can see that this directly reshaped the ways she practices and understands love. We are seeing here that once the constraints are lifted that make you feel ashamed due to your gender identity, you can love and care, truly, without borders, fears and boundaries. What a wonderful world that would be... and what’s interesting is that it doesn’t have to be so far out of reach. We concluded that this gendered balancing act we are conducting is all a representation that to love and be loved is to know and be known.

INTERVIEW REFLECTION AND TRANSCRIPT:

