

# 1 Can You Love More Than One Person At The Same Time? A Research Report

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“Caught between two lovers and I love them both the same” Mary Wells (Two Lovers, 1962)

## Introduction

The contemporary American model of love is that it is essentially a dyadic bond between two and only two individuals. Out of this bond arises feelings of eroticism, passion, and companionship which somehow merge together to form a unified conceptual whole. Co-existing with this ideal is an alternative model that survives, if not thrives, in the popular medium of films (e.g., *Control*, *The Notebook*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Serendipity*) and literature (e.g., Woody Allen’s *The Lunatic’s Tale*) that holds out the possibility of simultaneously loving two people at the same time. The idea of a simultaneous or concurrent love is also an emergent philosophical position. This position argues that the greatest love is not a dyadic bond but rather a concurrent love with multiple partners. In support of their position advocates of a concurrent love repeatedly point to the frequency of extramarital love affairs, the world wide institutionalization of the mistress, as well as the prevalence of the polygynous family system that all suggest that humans are not a monogamous species (Barash 2001; Giles 2004). More recently the appearance of polyamour “marriages” are noted as further evidence of not only the ability but the willingness of some individuals to enter into and maintain strong concurrent love relationships (Anapol 1997; Kipnis 2000; see overview in Wolfe 2003).

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Although novelists and artists have probed some of concurrent love’s psychological

nuances, psychologists have been remarkably silent in forming research designs to determine how individuals feel and manage multiple relationships. Psychologists' reluctance to investigate concurrent love relationships may stem from their deep seated cultural assumption that is highly improbable for anyone to truly love two people at the same time. For example, Robert J. Sternberg notes that a concurrent love may be sustained provided the individuals involved create separate and distinctive narratives of how their love was formed and what it means to the individuals involved. This allows the individual to create different roles both for themselves in the relationship as well as for their lovers and so fulfill different desires. Sternberg speculated that these narratives will be hierarchically arranged to help individuals manage their often conflicting emotions arising from competing emotions and resources invested in a concurrent love relationship. Concurring, Mary Hotvedt suggests that if a concurrent love is possible it would seldom be intentional, planned, or expected. Moreover, it would always result in a painful internal conflict (Psychology Today: Mar/April 2003 (2)).

If passionate or romantic love is organized around emotional exclusivity that includes the reordering of an individual's motivational priorities (Jankowiak 1995; 2000; 2005), what then is the effect of becoming emotionally (as opposed to sexually) involved with more than one person? Secondly, do individuals who insist they are involved in a concurrent love develop a similar level of intimacy with both lovers or do they, albeit tacitly, rank their lovers along a continuum of emotional significance? Finally, how do people involved in a plural love relationship manage potentially disrupted issues of loyalty and exclusivity that have disrupted so many love inclusive communes and most contemporary "open marriages"? To this end, our study was designed to understand whether it is possible, as Wells eloquently states in our opening

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quote and the popular media and literature suggests, for human beings to be deeply in love the same way with more than one person at the same time.

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### **Methods**

We began our study somewhat suspicious that a concurrent love is possible. Initially, we suspected that individuals were bracketing or shifting affectionate and thus motivational hierarchies between the dual lovers. Thus, what appeared to be co-loves would be in actuality nothing of the sort. Our interview posture was polite, respectful but cautious. We needed to be convinced that individuals were deeply caught up in a simultaneous or concurrent love. To this end, we noted body language, statements or expressions of emotional angst, and the strength of a person's conviction that they held deep-seated affections for their two lovers. We found an open interview approach the more productive means for obtaining subjective information. Individuals were remarkably insightful and self-reflective in describing their various experiences caught between two lovers. The interview approach, as Jeffrey Arnett, notes, is excellent for exploring a topic that has not been studied much and about which not much is known (2004:25). We used excerpts from the interviews to more fully display a person's everyday eloquence and thereby illustrate various thematic patterns common to individuals who experience a concurrent love.—

Individuals were recruited from a university population that includes a sizeable percentage of mature (i.e., over 30-year-old) students. Las Vegas is a highly mobile community with most people coming from some other state or country. Market research firms have found that Las Vegas is highly representative of the mainstream American society so that if a consumer item is accepted in Vegas, it will be accepted in other regions too (3).

There were two stages to our study. The first phase was exploratory. Upper division

university students were asked if they were ever in a concurrent love situation. Those who affirmed that they had were invited to participate. If they agreed, they were sent a questionnaire and asked to write about how they met their lovers, what each lover's personality was, how they managed their concurrent love, and what anxieties, if any, they felt. Lastly, everyone was asked if they remember their concurrent love experience as satisfying or unsatisfying. Upon the completion of this phase, our study was expanded to include in depth face to face interviews that explored these and related questions. The open interview phase enable us to observe an individual's reaction to our question which enable us to ask probing question that illicit a richer more complete explanation.

There are 37 students (22 females and 15 males) in the written survey and 27 participants (19 females and 8 males) in our face to face interview sample. Everyone interviewed is either in college or had graduated from college. Half of our sample was from divorce homes, while the other half were from intact homes. At the time of their involvement in concurrent love relationships, the relative age range for men was from early 20's to late 40's. In contrast, most women were in their late teens/early 20's with four in their thirties and one in her forties. All names used in the study are alias.

Each participant filled out a baseline form that included his or her age, birth place, marital status, and parents' martial history. Each interview began with querying the person about how they came to be in love with two people at the same time, everyone was asked to define love, describe the state of love felt toward each individual (e.g., passionate or companionship love), and noted if they experienced an ethical and emotional dilemma while "loving" two different people at the same time. Everyone was asked to comment on how they tried to

emotionally “manage” and ethically balance being in concurrent love relationships.

After only a few interviews we found individuals accounts of their involvement were remarkable similar to those in the earlier survey sample. By the midpoint of the study we found recurrent themes and behaviors that cut across gender lines and age cohorts. So powerful was the predictive quality of our analysis that we could often anticipate an individual’s comments before they were voiced.

Unlike polyamour relationships where everyone is aware of each other’s relationships, the concurrent love relationships we studied are best characterized as a kind of hidden love affair in that the different lovers were initially and for a long period of time unaware of the other lover. Our study did not focus on possible factors associated with individuals who stayed in a concurrent love relationship, instead we focused on how individuals defined, reacted to, and thus experienced a concurrent love relationship.

### **Ethnographic Patterns and Themes**

In our participants’ stories several themes emerged: 1) there are two types of love – one love is a comfort or companionship love, while the other love is a passionate or excited love; 2) individuals justify their concurrent love by appeals to a cognitive or psychic unity - each person constituted a partial or half sphere but when combined together form a cognitive whole of an ideal love; 3) their concurrent love was “managed” through bracketing or compartmentalization of their behaviors to such an extent that most individuals adopted a different persona when interacting with each lover; 4) men and women used similar metaphors and are equally forceful in noting how they were overwhelmed with desire, excitement, anticipation, and involvement with being in a concurrent love; 5) everyone acknowledged their concurrent love produced an

recurrent ethical dilemma that arose, in large part, to their inability to make a choice; 6) There were sex differences in that males were more open and admitted to enjoying having a sexual relationship with two different women; on the other hand, women were indifferent to this fact; and, finally, 7) regardless of sex, no one was satisfied with being stuck, in the words of a 26-year-old woman in, “my serious and painful dilemma.” We now will discuss each theme in more depth.

### **Comfort Love and Passionate Love: A Division of Emotional Labor**

The research on love repeatedly finds there are two distinct types of love - companionship (sometimes called comfort or attachment love) and passionate or romantic love - and that each has its own hormonal and neurobiological properties (Hatfield and Rapson 1993; Fisher 2006). Passionate love refers to any intense attraction that involves the intrusive thinking about one person within an erotic context with the expectation that the feeling will endure for some time into the future.

Psychologists found thirteen psycho-physiological characteristics often associated with being in passionate love (Fisher 2004:1996; Harris 1995:86; Leckman and Mayes 1999). These are: 1) thinking that the beloved is “unique”; (2) attention is paid to the positive qualities of the beloved; (3) contact or thought of the beloved induces feelings of “exhilaration,” “increased energy,” “heart pounding,” and intense emotional arousal; (4) in adverse times, feeling connected to the beloved is magnified; (5) “intrusive thinking;” (6) feeling possessive and dependent on the beloved; (7) a desire for “union” with the beloved; (8) strong sense of altruism and concern for the beloved; (9) individuals re-order their priorities to favor the beloved; (10) sexual attraction for the beloved; (11) “emotional union” takes “precedence over sexual desire.” (12) Passionate

love is generally temporary (i.e., it can “range from a few days to a few years; but the limited duration is one distinguishing feature from companionship love” (3).

In contrast, comfort love is a deep affection felt toward “those with whom our lives are deeply intertwined. It also involves feelings of deep friendship, empathic understanding, and a concern for another’s welfare (Hatfield 1988:193-194; Hatfield and Rapson 1996). It is tacitly understood that comfort love which often starts with a sexual or erotic component may or may not retain these as a primary feature. This does not mean companionate love is not without its passions. Percy Shelly, the 19th century poet, thought passion an integral aspect of both loves; albeit romantic love tended to be more physical, while companionate love more spiritual. It also does not mean that passionate love does not shift with the layering of mutual exchanges into companionate love over time. In fact, we found that at times – as suggested by popular media and literature – that the shift from passionate to companionate love plays a role in providing a rationale and context for becoming involved in a second relationship that fulfills a desire for passionate love.

Everyone interviewed more or less shared Shelly’s insight into how they experienced the different loves. Individuals readily acknowledged they were deeply in love with both lovers albeit differently and sexually involved with one and occasionally both. Our interviews further revealed each person had a deep companionship love with one person (usually the first lover) and a passionate love (usually the second or newest) lover. In addition, no one in our sample admitted to being in love with two companionship lovers or two passionate lovers. In all instances there was a clear cut separation – One person was the companionship love, and the other was the passionate love.

Respondents noted their companionship lover had the following personality traits: kind, easy going, considerate, giving, committed to family, and, in general, a “good person” who was more of a “stay at home mom or dad.” In contrast, the passionate lover was characterized as someone who was bubbly, lively, fun to be with, exciting, well spoken, aloof, mysterious, and had a strong sexual presence. Several people noted, upon reflection, that the passionate lover had a personality that was more equivalent to “a bad man” or “a bad girl.” In many ways, the passionate lover shared many traits associated in literary accounts with a femme fatale or status fatale persona (Jankowiak and Ramsey 2000).

The difference between types of lovers can be seen in the following examples:

- A 32 year old woman recalled that “John (her second and more passionate lover) does things for me, he has intensity and unexpectedness to his demeanor I find attractive. Jim (her companionship love) is more down to business; “I love him because he loves me and all my kids.”

- A 32 year old man made the following distinction between his lovers. He observed that “One type was sexually powerful the other was comfortable, she cared about me more and I also though she understood me more.”

- A 27 year old man acknowledged that “My love for both women was intense but in a very different way.”

Another example that illustrates the equally strong but contrasting reasons behind the deep emotional bonds our participants sought to articulate comes from a 29 year old woman who admitted that “I love both men deeply but for different reasons. I wanted one for emotional support. For example, Dave [her first love] is always there for me. He helped me solve my



problems. He always encouraged me at everything I tried to do. On the other hand, I wanted Steve [her second or passionate love] physically. I just wanted him so much. I would have someone to make out with. I was passionately attracted to Steve though I always put more importance on Dave.” Later in the interview she qualified her attachment to Steve by noting”...., he made me laugh and I felt good about myself. Dave was never good at that. I was totally in love with Steve (her second love) just after a few days, where it took me a year to fall in love with Dave.” She was acutely aware that her concurrent love bonds resulted in the reordering of her priorities. She observed that “After falling in love with Steve everything about Dave started to annoy me. The only thing that bored me about Steve was he was a flirt - he created anxiety and I could not relax and keep focus on maintaining the relationship.” Still, she added, “I always got excited when Dave [her first love] instant messaged me but with Steve this was not so.”

A person’s first lover was overwhelmingly the comfortable love who is considered to be a good man or woman and a potential father or mother. In short, he or she is a life companion. The second lover is seen as exciting, aloof, mysterious, dangerous, and potential a “bad boy or bad girl.” For example, a 32 woman acknowledged that she was attracted to her second lover because “there was a secret in him that I wanted to discover, even if it took me 20 years.” The second lover was a “hot lover” who she did not consider worthy of marriage. The very qualities that made the person attractive were also the qualities that made him or her less attractive as a life partner. For example, a 42 year old woman noted “He was a charmer but I didn’t look at him as a father material. He knows how to spend quality time with me. I enjoy that.” On the other hand, she adds, that “Carl [her first love] I love because he truly loves me and all my kids. He saw to it that we are all taken care of no matter what.”

No one admitted to falling in love with two people they were dating at the same time. For everyone, their concurrent love relationships arose when they were already deeply involved in a relationship when they met someone new or were in the process of ending a relationship. Unlike a “typical” extra marital affair where the individual involved either returns to their first lover or divorces and moves on with their new found lover, a concurrent love existed in a state of liminality; whereby the individual(s) involved refused to make a choice and give up one lover for another. Instead, there was a concerted effort to maintain an ongoing relationship with both lovers. In the individual’s mind they had two different kinds of lovers. In fulfilling different desires with each, they had – in a way – achieved an ideal love combining both passionate and companionate love. For example, a 42 year-old woman who was adamant she loved both men equally, noted “I had the best of both worlds. Each lover had different qualities and I wanted to combine them together. I thought it possible to love both –but in the end I found I could not.” A 28 year old woman admitted that, “... my new lover gave me more first-hand attention compared to my first lover. He told me he cared about what I did and what I liked.” She added, “I was attracted to that attention. I want to possess him completely.” But then she adds, “...when I was faced with having to leave my first love – a kind man who often tried to help me, I found I could not leave him. I wanted to and yet I could not. It was then that I decided I wanted to combined my lovers together and form a perfect whole. But I failed....”

### **Justifying Concurrent Love as – The ‘Best or Worst of Both Worlds’**

Individuals’ struggles to unite both types of love into a unified whole is consistent with the western folk model of love that regards romantic love and comfort love as constituting two ends along a single continuum. Given this folk understanding, there is a level of plausibility in the

individual's justification for wanting to keep their concurrent loves: They are striving to combine, albeit with different partners, features to create a unified whole. For many, there was at least at the beginning little or no contradiction. Everyone acknowledged that both lovers were in their own way complimentary and thus fit into a unified cognitive scheme that appeared plausible, suitable, and livable. In striving to produce a rationale of their ideal lover, respondents took attributes and behaviors they prefer from each and wove them into an imaginary whole. A number of individuals reported, as concurrent love advocates claim, experiencing a deeper, richer, and more meaningful satisfaction being involved with multiple lovers. Their satisfaction, however, appears to be relative brief.

Interpersonal conflict arose whenever passionate love shifted to a more comfortable love. Individuals sought to keep the twin love separate and not emerge together into one. This accounts, we suspect, for the volatility of interpersonal communications wherein physical and verbal fights erupted with the passionate lover but never the companionship lover. In not wanting to have the passionate love relationship lapse into a more comfortable love and thus emerge together into a similar feeling state, individuals struggled to reinsert some tension and anxiety back into that particular relationship. In the end, their efforts failed.

It is significant that no one who maintained concurrent loves acknowledged being happy, satisfied, or nourished emotionally during this time. It speaks loudly to the burdens of departing from a pair bond relationship organized around emotional exclusivity. For example, a 25 year-old man admitted that "being in love with two women at the same time was one of the most difficult situations I had ever dealt with. The time commitment alone was astonishing. Between two women and my job I didn't have time to relax. Mentally the situation was unbearable. He

added “I felt guilty, especially to Nancy, my first love, but I found Jane so exciting too.” He goes on “Nancy is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with and Jane is just a strong love passion.” Another 27 year–old man acknowledged that “I liked having multiple sex partners but once it developed into a close relationship I found I was not able to give undivided attention to both lovers. It was very time consuming and emotionally wore me out.” Concurring, a 23 year-old woman told us that, “I did not like it when I was in love with both of them. It took up much of my time. I started to get depressed. I felt no peace. I got little psychological satisfaction. I also became anti-social. I decided to break it off and focus on school. I was able to bring my GPA up again. I am happier now than I have ever been in the last couple of years.”

### **Compartmentalization of Behavior: The Creation of a Dual Persona**

Although individuals imagined they had created a unified, albeit a complex, love that involved two distinct personalities, they were acutely aware of the importance of keeping the two lovers separate from one another so as not to engender jealousy but also to more effectively manage boundaries and time commitments to reduce cognitive dissonance. Further, respondents noted it was imperative not to treat each lover the same. To this end, individuals used different means to bracket each relationship that ranged from adopting different personas with each lover, maintaining geographic distance between lovers, deliberating seeking to have completely different experiences so that they would be able to create different and thus non competing narrative histories, and, in the case of women, use degrees of sexual intimacy to maintain a tacit ranking in their motivational priorities.

Individuals in our sample, much like some bisexuals in a concurrent relationship (Weinberg, Williams and Pryor 1994), tried to manage their relationship through bracketing, a cognitive

technique that seeks to forget, however momentarily, about their involvement with another. For example, a 36 year-old woman admitted that she tried to “mentally zero out the lover I was not with. If a lover called I totally zeroed in [or focused] on the one who called.” She acknowledged that sometimes when she was having sex with one lover, she started to think of the other lover which she found highly disturbing. Another 23 year-old woman admitted her efforts to create psychological borders often failed. She notes “At times nothing work - I couldn’t even function or think straight. I was completely preoccupied - I thought about them all the time but my inability to choose paralyzed me. It resulted in me losing both of them. Now I am alone again.”

Other individuals were relatively more successful in maintaining their concurrent love. One way was to create separate histories or narratives of their beginnings and activities. This served as a foundation for establishment of anchoring memories that reinforced their mutual commitment. Anchoring memories are symbolic of a strong bounded relationship (Collins and Gregor, n.d.). They are, therefore, an important index of the presence or absence of intimacy. We found that for most people their anchoring memories served, as it had for Collins and Gregor’s monogamous couples, as the most emotionally salient memory of their relationship. If a relationship’s vitality is dependent upon having a distinct historical memory that can reinforce a couple’s collective identity, then it is essential for individuals involved in a concurrent love to develop couple memories through engaging in different activities. This is exactly what individuals strived to do. For example, if one lover liked to go dancing, then that individual would not go dancing with the other but rather would go see a movie. If both liked movies – the individual would select action films for one lover, while the other lover would go to comedy or horror films. The type of activity was less important than in keeping the activities and micro

events separate and thus different. Further, several people readily admitted they took on a different persona or personality with each lover. As one woman admitted “I truly became a different person when I was with each lover. I wore different clothes, even adjusted my hair style so I seemed, at least to myself, to become a different person.” Another 34 year-old woman noted that she had to be different with each lover. If not, I would not be able to stay in love with both.” What stood out in all of the interviews was that individuals were highly cognizant of why this bracketing was important.

Another way individuals sought to maintain boundaries between two loves was the use of geographic distance. By choosing individuals in different cities through maintaining one relationship and starting another after moving to a different city, some were able to live with their comfort lover while negotiating a long distance affair with their passionate lover. This enabled them to focus on one lover at a time and not have their momentary prioritization undermined by an unexpected appeal from the other lover. Compartmentalizing enabled the individual to momentarily forget they were involved with someone else. Thus, they strove to create the illusion of a single dyadic bond along cultural models. For some, these strategies did reduce conflicts that may have arisen from each lover demanding greater focused attention. Most strove, to borrow a line from an old Crosby Stills and Nash song, “to love the one you’re with.” Others adopted a different strategy by momentarily rank ordering their loves - one became their primary lover and the other a secondary love. These mental acts enabled respondents to ‘postpone’ having to choose between lovers. When the bracketing actions and compartmentalization tactics failed, the individuals’ ability to keep separate their motivational priorities broke down resulting in feelings of guilt and deep seated remorse. For example, a 25 year-old man noted he strove to

balance his involvement with two women by talking with both each day. However, he noted that his first lover Jamie he only spoke to for five minutes, while his second or newest and most passionate lover Nicole, he always called last and spoke with her for a long time. When asked why he did not leave Jamie for Nicole, he quickly admitted that “as the days went by, the warm fuzzy excited feeling I had for Nicole started to deteriorate and my love towards Jamie started to strengthen. I started missing Jamie intensely, and I called her anytime that I could to talk to her. During the first few weeks of dating Nicole, I would always put Jamie on hold or tell her I would call her back. But after a couple of months, I started to do the opposite, putting Nicole on hold all the time or canceling dates with Nicole so I would be able to talk to Jamie on the phone. Things eventually didn’t work out between Nicole and me, and the relationship between Jamie and me became stronger than ever. I later broke up with Nicole and continue to this very day dating Jamie, and I couldn’t be any happier. But the feeling of love that I feel towards Jamie is something of greater magnitude. I don’t only love her physically, but I also love her mentally and emotionally. I feel as if I can’t be without her or spend another day living, knowing that she isn’t okay. “His shift in feelings between passionate and a deeply felt companionship love is representative of others life stories.

### **Commonalities and Differences in the experience of Concurrent Love**

With the exception of value placed on sexual pleasure, there was no significant sex difference in the way men and women described their feelings, dilemmas, and uncertainties of being in love with more than one person. We did find that men more than women commented on the importance of sexual passion. A 28 -year-old man recalled “I did love her and the sex was so good too.” All eight men’s comments are descriptions of passionate love that was always

intertwined with an emphasis on heightened sexual satisfaction. In the words of one 37- year-old man currently involved in maintaining concurrent love bonds, “I love my wife, she is kind and loyal and will always be there for me, but Sue (his new and more passionate love) the sex is so good. I never had it that good. She moans and turns and moves her body in such an hmm way.” He adds (after a brief pause) “I love both women, they give me different things. It is not just sex there is deep feeling for Sue too (A longer pause) All my friends say I should give up Sue because she is no good and is using me and I will miss Cathy (his wife). I really do not know what to do.” His angst is typical of the men interviewed in that it highlights the heightened sexual tension that is encompassed within powerful emotional bonds.

Women’s comments on sexual desire, on the other hand, were more diffused. Emphasis on erotic/sexual aspects of the relationship may or may not be noted and if so it was noted in passing. Women were adamant in wanting to discuss their emotional entanglement. For the vast majority, emotional conflict was the primary corner stone upon which they preferred to organize their memory.

It is notable that women but not men used degrees of sexual intimacy as one way to distinguish and rank order in degrees of relative importance their two loves. Women indicated that if they were sexually intimate with one lover, they would not be with the other. A few women viewed sex with both lovers as, in the words of a 22 year old woman, being “awkward and dirty.” No man voiced this concern.

Men’s comments reveal a stronger, more emphatic, declaration of the importance of sexual fulfillment and how one woman (usually the newest) was more sexually satisfying. This may reflect a prevalent pattern where men are expected to voice their preference for sexual



enjoyment. Men’s heightened interest in sexual satisfaction is also consistent with research that finds men more adamant about their need for sexual fulfillment; whereas women tend to blend the sexual into the emotional so that talking about one implies the other (Baumeister and Tice 2001; Diamond 2008). It is important to remember that no matter the expressions of the importance of sexual satisfaction, the men we spoke with were willing to struggle – at least for a limited time- with the difficulties attendant with being simultaneously involved with multiple lovers because of the emotional entanglements that were an essential component of both love bonds.

Further, we found that there was a sex difference in the final choice of lover where our participants felt compelled to choose one or the other. Our sample found that 14 out of 41 women ultimately selected, after much anguish, the “good guy” or comfort lover as their marital or long term partner; while 5 out of 51 men, with equal anguish, selected the “good girl” or comfort love. In contrast, 12 men and 9 women selected the passionate or newer lover, while 11 respondents were not able to make a choice and lost both lovers (See Table 1). Men and women

**Table 1. Mate Choice Data**

	<b>Companionate (Good Guy/Girl)</b>		<b>Passionate (Bad Guy/Girl)</b>		<b>No Choice</b>		<b>*Unknown</b>	
		%		%		%		%
<b>Men (23)</b>	5	21.74%	12	52.17%	5	21.74%	1	4.35%
<b>Women (41)</b>	14	60.87%	9	39.13%	6	26.09%	12	52.17%

\*The ‘Unknown’ category represents both those who at the time of the survey or interview had not made a choice or, in a few cases did not convey whom –if either- they had chosen.

tend to experience excitement and difficulties of concurrent love more or less the same; however, as Table 1 reveals, they do resolve their cognitive dissonance differently through the choice of which love bond is chosen as primary. Men overwhelmingly placed a high value on passionate love as evident in their choosing that love experience over the more familiar comfort love. In contrast, women showed a preference for the companionate love bond. It is important to note here that none of our respondents had children. We suggest, based on the physiological and neural mechanisms involved in mate selection (Fisher 2005 et al), that the number of men that selected the companionate love would be higher if that relationship also involved children.

## **Discussion**

The above statements concerning the discomfort of trying to live within a concurrent love are highly representative of our sample. Further support for this view comes from our interviews in which each individual was asked if there are any advantages for being in love with two people simultaneously. Everyone quickly answered “NONE.” They readily and easily admitted that the experience was “not pleasurable,” but something “emotionally stressful.” They also acknowledged that their efforts to gain the ‘best of both worlds,’ though conceptualizing their lovers into an idealized union failed. Ironically, in attempting to create a unified whole, through striving to treat each relationship as separate and thus different served less to unify and more to preserve two discrete, albeit dyadic, love bonds. Ultimately this served to undermine the very cognitive unification they saw as fulfilling. Further, their continuous efforts to hold onto their ideal had a negative impact. Individuals continuously commented on how “frustrated and confused [they] felt,” and how “stressed out [they were] all the time,” and how simply exhausted

they were “with living.”

The desire to forge a greater more unified love created the worst of both worlds. For example, a 42 year old woman admitted she thought “God was punishing me for getting involved with these men.” Another woman “thought of suicide.” The inability to sustain their commitment to two different relationships that involved different personas proved to be an unstable and untenable situation. Individuals’ lovers and, we suspect, the individuals themselves, desire for emotional and sexual exclusivity proved too powerful.

Why are these relationships so unstable? What accounts for their fragmentation? From a cultural perspective, is it the absence of cultural scripts that provide a guide and ethical justification for forming plural love relationships? Had such scripts existed, would there have been less guilt and thus better outcomes? If love is a constructed emotion there should be little or no universal attributes associated with its presence. It should be completely reshaped into anything a community wants it to be, including denial of love’s very presence. On the other hand, if love is a universal emotion that has its own psychological and endocrinological properties, it would be difficult for a community to completely reshape love according to its local values.

The endocrinological research (Porges, 1988; Fisher et al 2002) and cross-cultural research (Fischer 2004; Jankowiak and Fisher 1992; Jankowiak 1995, 2008) lends support to the position that love is a human universal with its own properties with its strongest attribute being the pull toward emotional exclusivity. In this way, biology matters. Individuals’ personal anguish and emotional stress arose when they could no longer keep the dual, and, often dueling, lovers (i.e., passionate and companionship love) separate from one another.

Because each type of love has a different endocrinology (i.e., serotonin is closely associated with passionate love, while oxytocin is with companionship love) (Fisher et al, 2002), the chemical difference may account for the difficulty individuals had in keeping the two types of love separate from one another. Passionate love results, within a relatively short period, in the dampening of romantic excitement in favor of a more subdued, albeit equally profound and comfortable, oxytocin-based love. It seems, at least for most of the participants in our sample, that as soon as individuals are no longer able to keep the dual loves separate, an acute cognitive dissonance arises and with it an immensely psychological and ethical discomfort. When this occurs, a person's guilt is heightened.

In the end, the problematic nature of concurrent love may stem from the dyadic nature of love. Only two individuals can co-exist simultaneously on the continuum and then only if they remain within different domains along that continuum (5). This raises the question: Would the experience of the individuals in our small sample have been any different if they lived in a community that supported plural or concurrent loves? In spite of hopeful claims and positive assertions, other researchers have shown that concurrent love is inherently fragile, unstable, and seldom long lasting (Gillis 2004; Steinberg 2003). We suspect that, while there may be occasionally successful concurrent love relationships, ethnographic and historical studies repeatedly document it is not feasible on a larger community scale. For example, Benjamin Zablocki's (1980) comprehensive sociological research into plural or group love arrangements (e.g., Oneida, Kerista, New Buffalo) found that group love arrangements held insurmountable difficulties for its members. In spite of the claim that plural love is a viable alternative to monogamous love, research found that sex inclusive communes and ad hoc individual

polyamour bonds never last beyond the life span of its founding generation (Berger 1972:244). In fact, in a relative short time, they are often abandoned in favor of some type of pair bond relationship (Hatfield et al 1978; Zablocki 1980).

Mormon fundamentalist communities proclaim that the polygamous family is based in a plural love where everyone should love everyone equally. Research in the community found no evidence that any family had successfully reached the religiously inspired ideal (Jankowiak 1995; 2004). Historians have also found little support that the 19th century Oneida community, organized around group or plural love, achieved that state or was able to prevent the formation of dyadic love bonds (Fisher 2006; Foster 1992).

A definitive study on contemporary polyamour lifestyle has yet to be written. To date, most commentary on the polyamour lifestyle has been written by insiders who are also practitioners. Leanna Wolfe, an anthropologist who has studied polyamours, admitted in conversation that polyamours, much like individuals in our study, seem to sustain their complex relationship due, in part, to a division of emotional labor: One person is the passionate lover; and the other is the companionship lover. Clearly, we need a more systematic and in depth study to understand how individuals manage their plural love bonds as well as the reasons behind the relative success and failure of polyamour marriages.

Further, the inability of our respondents to manage these often competing affective emotions arises out of their need to reorder motivational priorities that are linked to the formation of an exclusive bond. It is clear from the majority of interviews that individuals in concurrent loves also felt an intense ethical guilt. This is evidence for culture's power to influence emotional and cognitive models and resultant scripts. It is also clear from written accounts and interviews that

people quickly became overwhelmed trying to live within competing emotional experiences. The pull of companionship love and the push of passionate love prove to be too powerful for individuals to effectively manage. In the end, they simply lost control of their love, their lovers, and their relationships.

### **Conclusion**

We are in agreement with artists and other advocates of concurrent love: Humans are capable of deep-seated simultaneous loves. Concurrent loves, however, can seldom last for any significant length of time. Passionate and companionate love have their own neurological, hormonal, and cognitive elements that both enable the initiation of concurrent love bonds and undermine efforts to sustain them simultaneously. Because romantic passion and its sibling companionate love have their separate endocrinological components, the love states can distill and exist separate from one another to a large degree. However, in time, passionate love tends to move toward a more companionship based or oxytocin influenced love. Whenever that occurs, cognitive dissonance arises as the two lovers that embody these endpoints of the love spectrum can no longer be readily or easily separated. Because the love experiences now occupy a similar category or cognitive geography, dictates of time and emotional commitment from cultural influences create a need to make a choice that the individual, driven by an internal need for both, agonizes over making. The blurring of categories and emotional experiences present a severe challenge to the individual's motivational hierarchy of values that ultimately undermines his or her ability to manage concurrent love relationships. It is the inability to maintain the separate love types that accounts for concurrent love's inherent instability. A concurrent love requires a strong dedication to maintain simultaneously, albeit separate, life histories or narratives that for

most are simply too difficult to sustain. Moreover, the construction of separate personae creates a dual personality that also cannot endure. The very nature of what these individuals' hope to achieve fragments their sense of self; in the process, weakening the very foundation of the bond they seek to sustain with another individual. What may have began as a need to satisfy both passion and secure companionship eventually turns into an acute psychological dilemma that is experienced as intensely dissatisfying and ultimately personally destructive. The inability to resolve the dilemma of merging both types of love into a larger unified whole underscores the primacy of the dyadic bond that is based more on emotional than sexual exclusivity. In the end, love – the dyadic bond it is - conquers all.

### **Endnotes**

- 1) We would like to thank the following individuals for their support, insights and encouragement:
- 2) Psychology Today in its March-April 2003 had several experts respond to the query “can you be in love with more than one person at the same time? The conclusion was that a dual or concurrent love can only exist in a state of psychological turmoil and thus it can never be a complete or satisfying experience.
- 3) Its representativeness is evident in that marketing companies prefer to test new products first in Vegas as research has found that if it is an accepted locality it will also be approved in other regional markets.
- 4) Passionate love's emotional state may also be manifested behaviorally as “labile psychophysical responses to the loved person, including exhilaration, euphoria, buoyancy, spiritual feelings, increased energy, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, shyness, awkwardness,...

flushing, stammering, gazing, prolonged eye contact, dilated pupils, .. accelerated breathing, anxiety ... in the presence of the loved person.” (Fisher 1996:32).

5) Moreover, it may explain why no one in our sample acknowledged being simultaneously in love with three, five, or more people at the same time. In fact, everyone thought it was absurd that this could ever be possible.

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