

What Program for Love in the 21st Century?

Thinking with and beyond Luhmann.

Chiara Piazzesi (Université du Québec à Montréal)

Martin Blais (Université du Québec à Montréal)

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Chiara Piazzesi, Ph. D.

Sociology department, and UQAM Research Chair for the Study of Intimate, Conjugal, and Romantic Relationships, Université du Québec à Montréal (QC), C.P. 8888, Succ. Centre-ville, Montréal, H3C 3P8

piazzesi.chiara@uqam.ca, 514-431-2276.

ORCID: 0000-0001-7708-6496

Martin Blais, Ph. D.

Sexology department, and Research Chair on Sexual and Gender Diversity, Université du Québec à Montréal, C.P. 8888, Succ. Centre-ville, Montréal (QC), H3C 3P8,

blais.martin@uqam.ca, 514-9687-3000 ext. 4031.

ORCID: 0000-0001-8513-6596

Corresponding author: Chiara Piazzesi, PhD, piazzesi.chiara@uqam.ca

Abstract

From a sociological perspective, the paper examines how normative frameworks for intimate relationships have changed since the publication of Luhmann's *Love as Passion* (1982). Building on Luhmann's notion of a *program* for love, we discuss his claim that late 20th century love semantics were organized around a program of *understanding*. We argue that *understanding*, requiring partners to incorporate the other's worldview and self-image into the observation of their behavior to infer "love," has lately evolved into a program of *acceptance*. The latter provides solutions to problems stemming from societal evolution: the inclusion of individuals in a

functionally differentiated society, the weakening of traditional frameworks stabilizing intimate expectations, and the rising relevance of therapeutic semantics for intimate relationships. Drawing on sociological scholarship, advice literature, and empirical data, we show that contemporary love semantics now centers on the question, “*what should I accept?*”, and on the definition of the limits of acceptance.

Keywords

Intimate relationships, love, program, semantics, acceptance, Luhmann

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Trying to provide a general theoretical account of the transformations of intimate relationships has been a popular endeavour for sociologists in recent decades. Available analytical discussions of the existing interpretations highlight a frequent misalignment between empirical observations, explanatory frameworks, and theoretical scope (Musiał 2013; Piazzesi *et al.* 2025; Poder 2023). Empirical work often refrains from generalizing theoretical claims, theoretical work often lacks a convincing empirical foundation, and some interpretations tend to be more ideological than sociological (or *observational*). While discussing these shortcomings remains beyond the scope of our paper, our goal is to build upon Luhmann’s theoretical contribution to the study of intimate relationships to propose an empirically grounded interpretation of observable trends in Western intimacies. Using Luhmann’s conceptual scaffolding as a toolbox fostering sociological curiosity (Laursen, Harste & Roth 2022), we will hinge our analysis on Luhmann’s concept of *program*, defined as the set of necessary criteria steering the application of the negative and positive value of the code of a symbolically generalized communication medium [SGCM] (Luhmann 2012). For instance, in the legal system, where the law is the SGCM and the code is “lawful/unlawful” (Roth & Schütz 2015), programs consist in “legally coded power, the form of laws, court rulings establishing precedents, and contracts” (Luhmann 2012, p. 226) defining the circumstances under which something is coded as (un)lawful. Similarly, the function of a program for the application of the code of love (love/not love) is to condition the observation and description of a person’s actions: the program assists *ego* (the observer who experiences), but also *alter* (the observed

partner who acts), in identifying behaviors that can be interpreted as signs that the loving disposition endures.

Programs are not idiosyncratic solutions to contingent undecidedness, rather shared repertoires for meaning-making: they entail “a vast semantic apparatus”, historically contingent and changing (whereas codes are invariable), the function thereof is managing complexity and variation to ensure the persistence of a social interest in the positive value of the code (Luhmann 2012; Esposito 2021). For this reason, Luhmann’s concept of “program” provides an analytical framework capable of linking analytical scales, from the level of interpersonal communication to that of cultural patterns and corresponding structural features of society.

In what follows, we will attempt an analytical exercise similar to the one Luhmann carries out in the penultimate chapter of *Love as Passion*, where he suggests and empirically discusses the coalescing of late 20th century Western love semantics into a “program of understanding”. Our aim is to assess where we stand four decades after *Love as Passion*. We suggest that the program of understanding unfolded as Luhmann surmised, that its shortcomings in solving the problems emerging from societal evolution have fostered the elaboration of a further program for love, and that this new dominant program is hinged on a semantics of *acceptance*¹. Drawing on a variety of empirical data, including interview material from a 2024 study on Canadian adults, we will detail how the program of acceptance provides specific solutions (Knudsen 2010) to problems that can no longer being treated by the previous program.

1. Intimate systems in the second half of the 20th century, and the “program of understanding”

After having traced the history of the emergence, in Western Europe, of a code for love, the selective consolidation of a corresponding semantic repertoire over eight centuries, and the evolution of the intimate system (couple) as we know it, Luhmann devotes the last two chapters of *Love as Passion* to the most recent socio-structural transformations affecting the intimate sphere. Taking stock of trends that became salient in the 1970s and early 1980s (the book was published in German in 1982²), Luhmann observed that recent love semantics conceptualized love

¹ As for Luhmann’s analysis, our considerations apply mainly to mainstream cultural trends in Western Europe and North America. Conducting comparative analysis of non-Western cultural orientations is outside the scope of this paper.

² Luhmann began his sociological reflections on love more than a decade earlier, as demonstrated by his work and teaching in the late 1960s (see Luhmann 2008, especially the introduction by A. Kieserling; Morgner 2014).

as the problem of stabilizing the intimate relationship, which represented a shift from previous semantic repertoires. Late 20th century semantics reflects the awareness that entering and intentionally sustaining a love bond does not shield lovers from the instability of intimacy, which is increased by the “autonomization” of intimate systems (Luhmann 1986a, p. 156) from their traditional scaffoldings (community, religion, family of origin, etc.), and even from marriage (whereas Romantic semantics’ main innovation had been the merger of love and marriage) in a functionally differentiated society. Personal resources and individual considerations outweigh parental influence, social prestige, and the reproduction of material conditions, and the highly unstable character of intimate relationships is thematized as stemming from personalities. As a result, personal communication becomes at the same time the only operational level available for solving conflicts and the one on which it has to be established whether the agreement on mutual love is ongoing. Late 20th century love semantics prescribes that the lover’s behavior communicate that one is their own person (i.e. one does not act out of habit) *and* that one’s behavior isn’t exclusively self-serving (e.g. to avoid conflict), rather takes into account the beloved person’s vision of the world. Hence, to be coded as “loving”, communication must at the same time locate the source of love in one’s individuality (*ego*) and identify the other’s individuality (*alter*) as love’s cause³. Individual difference, as the main distinction structuring personal relationships, becomes both the ground for love and the origin of its proverbial irritations – which love itself cannot overcome (a hopelessness that late Romantic love semantics had coded as the insurmountable nature of gender difference). Idealization of love and the rhetoric of *passion*, which made love socially plausible and probable in the past, cannot provide a basis for enduring intimacy viewed as interpersonal interpenetration⁴. When love is “supposed to give every individual a chance to identify with [themselves] and to be the Self of [their] ego” (Luhmann 1986a, p. 167), semantic solutions are needed to treat conflicts rooted in individual difference as the only acceptable source of loving attitudes and as leading to incompatible observations and attributions between partners.

³ Luhmann claims indeed that the “I” (*ego*) in intimate relationships is a “paradoxical attribution”, because it must provide “stable dispositions” that *alter* can recognize and at the same time demonstrate “the willingness to transcend oneself in direction of the other” (1995, p. 226).

⁴ Namely a relationship between psychic systems in which “every operation, every action and every observation with which one system reproduces sequences of events [...] also occurs in the other. Each operation has to be aware of the fact that, as an action of the one system, it is at the same time the inner experience of the other, and this is not only an external condition, but rather the very condition of the reproduction of such action.” (Luhmann 1986a, p. 174).

According to Luhmann, such solutions are coalescing into a “program of understanding” (Luhmann 1986a, p. 168), whose function is treating the problem of intimacy in a social context in which intimate relationships are increasingly specializing to facilitate the mutual validation of highly individualized persons. A program of understanding implies the inclusion of *alter*’s worldview, experience, and self-image into the observation of *alter*’s behavior to make sense of the latter through interpretation and attribution, and to assess whether that behavior is (still) demonstrating love (Luhmann 1986a: 168).

In Luhmann’s general theory of communication, “understanding” (*verstehen*) is one component of communication as the threefold distinction between information (the content selection), utterance (the reasons why something is communicated) and understanding as the observation of communication through the distinction between “information value” and “the reasons for which the content is being uttered” (Luhmann 1990a: 157). Since communication is the operation of social systems, *understanding* means grasping that the way something is communicated depends on the state of the system that communicates – or, in Luhmann’s terms, to its *self-reference*. Seen this way, understanding applies not only to communication, but also to psychic systems (“persons”) and social systems (interactions, relationships, organizations, societies) (Luhmann 1986b: 81-82). A system understands another system when it observes the way the observed system handles its self-reference, hence the distinction between itself and its environment (Luhmann 1986b: 79-80). For instance, understanding someone’s behavior implies observing it as *theirs* and eventually describing it through attribution of intentions, values, reasons, and through further distinctions (such as appropriate/inappropriate, spontaneous/unnatural etc.). The understanding system must also operate through self-reference: to understand someone, I must be able to distinguish their behavior from mine, hence understand that how they behave depends on who they are; and also understand that I am not them, rather part of what they distinguish themselves from (i.e. their environment). Similarly to families (Luhmann 1990b), in intimate systems (love relationships) “all differences are individual”, i.e. “perceived and practiced” as such (Luhmann 1986b: 98): *who* the person is, and how they want us to see them, orients our understanding of their behavior or communication, and is the main source of information with regard to their loving dispositions. Intimacy is possible “only if double contingency is operationalized by personal attribution”, hence if *alter*’s behavior is “experienced as inwardly steered selection” conditioned by their inner world (Luhmann 1995: 224). As loving partner, *ego*

is expected to *understand* alter for who they are (or as they want to be seen [Moeller 2017]) and communicate such understanding as the basis of *ego*'s behavior. Stemming from the evolution of the SGCM *love*, such expectation is reflected in the equivalence between love and "understanding" in everyday parlance, and finds expression as the wish to be understood" (Luhmann 1986a: 29)⁵. *Understanding* hence becomes the main criterion to apply the code love/not love: a "program of understanding" organizes a semantic repertoire that frames love first and foremost as "validation of the self-presentation"⁶ (Luhmann 1986, p. 165) between highly individualized persons and is influenced by a growing therapeutic emphasis on self-disclosure and authenticity as factors of individual and dyadic wellbeing. The program of understanding treats the problem of stabilizing intimate communication in enduring intimate relationships between highly individualized individuals: the longer people are together, the clearer it becomes that they have other things to do and care about than prove their love to one another (see Luhmann's famous example of driving, in which the driving partner minds the road and the other expects them to ongoingly demonstrate love [1986a: 35]), hence the semantic repertoire must offer the chance to prove love as the acceptance of conflicting focuses (Luhmann 2012: 232-3). Understanding the singularity of the partner entails coming to terms with the inevitability of disappointments, in that they are different from us, different from what we would like them to be, and different from their own idealized self-presentation (Luhmann 1986a: 168). Observed through reference to *alter*'s self, *alter*'s experience, however upsetting, is simply part of who they are and must be loved for. The program of understanding thus streamlines a progressive trivialization (as opposed to idealization) of love in the second half of the 20th century (Luhmann 1986a: 159 f.), namely its democratization (Luhmann 2012: 206), the relinquishing of (traditional) high expectations, and the inclusion of disappointment as resulting from potential dyadic incompatibility (Piazzesi et al. 2018; Prandini 2012). By providing a solution to the problem of attuning individual idiosyncrasies without threatening them, the program's orientation toward what is personal (singularity) increases the

⁵ In this respect Luhmann uses both *verstehen* (understanding as grasping) and *Verständnis* (understanding as sympathy) to emphasize the proximity with everyday parlance, in which understanding is a codified expectation.

⁶ We translate *Selbstdarstellung* with "self-presentation" (instead of "self-portrayal" [Luhmann 1986: 165]) to preserve the semantic proximity with Goffman's main concept (1969 for the German edition), which Luhmann quotes right after this passage.

weakening of normative structures (e.g., family influence, religion) that previously stabilized expectations within relationships.

2. The semantics of individuality and its relevance for the program of love

In a sociohistorical perspective, the emergence of the intimate system provides the main *locus* for the validation of singularity. To assess the evolution of late 20th and early 21st century program for love, we must then take into consideration the semantic evolutions of individuality: how do late modern individual self-descriptions unfold, what kind of problem do individuals represent for themselves and for society, and how problems and solutions for communicating individuality affect love semantics.

The functional differentiation of society, where individuals are less and less integrated into one “area” of the social system (a subsystem in particular) and are rather the binding agents between function systems, has encouraged for a couple of centuries a reflexive turn of the personal system towards the foundational character of its (contingent) experience of the world as constituting their “self” (rather than the self being a juxtaposition of roles and responsibilities) (Luhmann 1995: 270). When individuality becomes the basis for individual claims to recognition and happiness, the individual must sustain self-descriptions that acceptably substantiate those claims, namely “by referring to what distinguishes it from all others” (Luhmann 2022: 267).

In the last century, therapeutic semantics has become the main form of “assistance” that individuals can reach out to in their effort to provide adequately individualized self-descriptions (Luhmann 1995: 270; Luhmann 1986b: 114). The therapeutic framework encourages psychological self-descriptions revolving around on the idea – which has relevance beyond the individual level – that (psychic) systems can be observed, and can self-observe, in their inability to observe (Luhmann 2013: 304). Through a causally explicative observation of a person’s biography (their past), latent structures can be revealed and then individually “owned” through a self-description fostering a sense of self-coherence (Piazzesi, Blais and Renaud 2025). Therapeutic semantics informs individual self-understandings where patterns rooted in biographical experiences coalesce to form a singularity that the individual can affirm as “who they (really) are”. Although this remains outside the scope of our paper, one could wonder whether the “psyche” has become, in recent decades, the last stronghold of a desire for a fixed, unchanging “reality” that one

can truthfully know and trust⁷. At any rate, the strength of semantic insistence on authenticity can be read in connection with the preference for psychological categories that are unconditionally true, as if one could reach a bedrock of reality under the fluctuations of consciousness and the “inauthenticity” of social life.

Thanks to the evolution and cultivation of therapeutic semantics (Ehrenberg 2010; Illouz 2007; Moskowitz 2001), 20th century semantics of individuality is dominated by the idea of the singularity of the individual biography, both as the self-reflected source of unity for the self and as the specific “distribution of coincidences, opportunities, and merits” (Luhmann 2022: 274) from which uniqueness results. Individual “careers” are no longer predictable based on birth and socialization, rather must be (self-)narrated as results and sources of personal singularity: on their basis individuals can stake their claims to individuality (Luhmann 2022: 294), hence distinguish themselves from others.

The relevance of these trends for the analysis of love semantics is threefold. Firstly, we can observe the gradual penetration of popular psychology into individual, dyadic, and social understandings of intimate relationships and family bonds as problematic due to individual differences, a penetration that Luhmann had already pointed out in *Love as Passion* (see also Mahlmann 1991). Secondly, the psychologization of late modern self-definitions, where individuals self-identify by referring to their early personal experience (e.g. upbringing, attachment styles, trauma), the foundational character of their needs and desires (e.g. sexual orientation), and their psychological experience of the organization of society (e.g. discrimination, marginalization, suffering, exclusion etc.), has selected personal attributions referring to psychological “latent structures” as the most viable justifications for individual claims also in intimate relationships. If such individual claims can be publicly disputed, intimate bonds are expected to offer the main locus for their unconditional validation: the SGMC love has itself loosened the preference for one form of relationship and evolved towards the internal

⁷ “Romanticism thereupon devises a style that relies on the reader’s *not* believing what the immediate description sets before him. [*Marx and Freud develop this way of observing*]. However, the problem is still not envisioned with sufficient clarity, and is dampened down in part through dialectics, in part through therapeutics, in part quite simply through sociological arrogance. Social class, therapist, free-floating intelligentsia – one continues to search for a position of observation that explains to oneself and to others their inability to see and that thereby places within reach knowledge of the world about which one can ultimately agree. And how else is one to get up the courage needed to revolutionize the world or to therapeutically heal people?” (Luhmann 2002: 189).

differentiation of available relationship options (casual / serious, exclusive / non-monogamous, same-gender / different-gender, married / unmarried, etc.).

Thirdly, the professionalization of couple therapy throughout the 20th century leads, as of the 1970s, to a legitimization of therapeutic concepts and practices as satisfactory solutions to the problem of stabilizing intimate relationships (Celello 2009), mainly through communicational techniques and attributions based on psychological typologies. The influence of therapeutic semantics on individual, biographically grounded self-definitions coalescing into claims of singularity encourages corresponding expectations for and within intimate relationships, that are now *explicitly* expected to provide ongoing and unconditional validation for the singularity of one's worldview, experience, and self-definition (what Finkel [2017] calls the “all-or-nothing” intimate relationship). Once made explicit and made programmatic, such expectation becomes subject to observational operations, hence a distinction through which the code of love is applied. The question is whether the program of understanding can satisfactorily orient the application of the code of love given this new set of expectations.

3. From understanding to acceptance

The program of understanding, although it increases the probability for intimate communication to continue despite disappointments, leads to further problems, that were already visible in the last two decades of Luhmann's career. The first difficulty is linked to the impossibility of a “total” understanding of the other person (Rabault 2023). For their understanding of *alter* to be complete, *ego* would have to dissolve into *alter* and “become” them (Luhmann 1986a: 168) – i.e. renouncing *ego*'s individuality and worldview and building into the relationship a fundamental asymmetry in demands for self-validation⁸. Unconditional understanding also lacks instructions for decision making: what should *ego* do when *alter*'s observed behaviors and dispositions are, say, self-destructive or life-endangering (Luhmann 1986a: 169)? When *alter* is unhappy with themselves, should *ego* show their love by validating *alter*'s worldview or by trying to change them and make them happy (Luhmann 2012: 207)?

⁸ According to Luhmann, the paradoxical nature of understanding between persons stems from the oscillation between self-reference and other-reference, that cannot be simultaneously operationalized: the more I understand someone else, the less I will understand myself – and vice versa. In addition, since communication's pace demands a high level of attention, focusing on the understanding of communication makes understanding *the partner* less probable or unfeasible (Luhmann 1986b: 96; Luhmann 1988).

Since the 1970s, issues of power, inequality, violence, and psychological harm in intimate relationships have been central in Western semantic production. Giddens' work on modern intimacy (1992) testifies to the collective anxiety regarding affective codependency, addiction, and power imbalance in intimate bonds. Since the 1980s, popular feminist discourse, therapeutic literature, and cultural productions have criticized the tenets and outcomes of the program of understanding as specifically harmful to women: heterosexual relationships hinged on "understanding" would entail self-sacrifice for women, who must instead learn to self-preserve and self-prioritize. Marriage, as an institutional, material, and political framework, and romantic love as its ideology, have been identified as loci of patriarchal power and oppression. In 1985, Robin Norwood's bestseller *Women Who Love Too Much* (1987) promised to teach women how to recognize the risk of self-annihilation and emancipate themselves from relationships with the "wrong man". This semantic evolution accompanied (and adapted to) dramatic changes in educational and professional paths for women (e.g. rising employment rates), and is intertwined with transformation in the moral, political, and legal framing of gender relationships⁹. The nexus of feminist demands and therapeutic semantics is a particularly intriguing one, as feminist criticism of traditional intimacy often adopted the language of psychology and popular self-help – a notable case being Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (Plant 2015; Wright 2008). Feminist critique targeted the psychological professions and therapeutic culture as potentially oppressive forces since the 1970s, as dominant psychological theories (such as attachment theory [Vicedo 2014]) would naturalize and enforce a gendered division of social spheres (see Benjamin 1988). Self-help and popular therapeutic discourse also traditionally burdened women with maintaining intimate harmony (Mahlmann 1991; Moskowitz 2001). However, therapeutic culture also contributed to the politicization of the private sphere: by marshalling psychological language and expertise, U.S. women's magazines since the 1950s gave voice to housewives' dissatisfaction with their reclusion into the private sphere (Moskowitz 2001). Those therapeutically informed conversations on gender

⁹ See Luhmann's remarks on the shift from a patriarchal society to a society in which gender is no longer acceptable as a hierarchical structure: "When society changes, and it uses the individual as a natural framework from which to rebuild families by organizing marriage around love relations, by organizing the economy around careers, and the political system around elections and a kind of political career – then you have the individual as a base, which, at the same time, criticizes the old society as an artificial construct that forces individuals into fixed positions." (Rasch 2000: 201).

roles converged towards feminist demands in the 1970s (with popular books such as *The Feminine Mystique* likely bridging the gap [Wright 2008])¹⁰.

Starting in the late 1980s, feminist scholarship identified romantic love myths as contributing to reinforce a gendered social order thwarting women's autonomy of choice by promoting self-loss and self-sacrifice (Evans 2003; Friedman 1998; hooks 2000; Kipnis 2003; Langford 1999). A similar campaign against asymmetrical relationships took place in anglophone relationship advice literature for women between the 1980s and the 2000s, aimed at warning women and empowering them to break free from toxic bonds (Hazleden 2004). Generalist marriage advice books, particularly in North America, focused on making relationships work in this context of skepticism, rejection of traditional roles, and women's growing personal ambitions to professional development and financial independence (Celello 2009). Although advice material still tended to persuade women to be more tolerant and forgiving (Celello 2009), women's self-sacrifice and resignation were no longer viable solutions to the problem of managing individual difference in intimate relationships.

The Queer movement also contributed to exposing the limits of "understanding". Queer demands are emblematic of the institutionalization of individuality as a legitimate basis for making claims. Inclusion is no longer primarily grounded in collective categories or hierarchical positions but in biographical self-descriptions that are expected to be validated. This shift is especially visible in the growing recognition of citizenship as both gendered (Hines, 2007; Walby, 1994) and sexual (Richardson, 2017), and in the critique of the neutral universality of the unmarked, traditional political subject. Queer and feminist claims exposed sexuality and gender as cardinal conditions through which inclusion and exclusion were already organized. What appears in politics as a demand for recognition of singular self-definitions reappears in the system of intimacy as a semantic innovation: love no longer self-stabilizes through merger of individualities or observation of differences, rather must unfold through the explicit, programmatic validation – also in terms of relationship structure and arrangements – of each partner's irreducible singularity.

¹⁰ Wright (2008, p. 326 in particular) indeed observes that "much unease about therapeutic culture has gendered undertones": for instance, Rieff and Lasch, partially influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, endorse a clearly traditional, patriarchal view of family relations and healthy psychological structure of the individual mind, that therapeutic culture is seen as undermining. Lasch's defense of the patriarchal family (1979) overlooks power relations in the family, and (in the 1979 *Preface*) summarize the problem of modern family as resulting from women's desire for leaving the private sphere and seeking economic independence.

The convergence between the semantics of individuality, therapeutic discourses, and criticism towards tradition in the private sphere is the sociocultural nexus along which the limitations of the program of understanding have unfolded. *Understanding* has little to offer to treat irritations coming from political demands for equality, from the increasing expectation that individual differences in desires and needs be acknowledged across social spheres, and from the increasing symmetrization of gender (i.e. its growing irrelevance to determine the right for individual demands to be validated). While reducing blaming and resentment, understanding does not contain a (however general) criterion to draw the boundaries of understanding, e.g. regarding self-destructive behavior, unhappiness, self-loss, perceived inequalities and injustices¹¹. Equating love with understanding and empathy can lead *ego* to blame themselves for not loving a partner enough to dissuade them from abusive behavior (Towns & Adams 2000).

We suggest that recent semantic solutions to these problems coalesce around a deepening of the program of understanding into a *program of acceptance*¹². We use “*acceptance*” to signal a shift (that Luhmann [1986a] had hinted to) in the way understanding is operationalized: if *alter*’s experience and behavior are observed as rooted in their psychological hardwiring (their “singularity”), the same is true for the way they can “love”. But this applies to a singularized *ego* as well. Here we can appreciate the logical consequences of psychological self-definitions through which individuals justify their claims, of the growing popularity of therapeutic semantics (promoting typologies and explanations through biographical narratives), and of criticism towards traditional forms of intimacy : one cannot be blamed for being so and so, one cannot be expected to change or self-sacrifice in the name of love – one can only be helped (sometimes by professionals) to observe one’s needs and desires, and find a way to respond to them that is self-validating while (if at all possible) compatible with that of their partner(s). Acceptance is required from others because it is encouraged towards oneself to begin with. This symmetry of acceptance

¹¹ The uber-popular advice book by John Gray, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), exemplifies this limitation of a program of understanding: the book uses gender difference (as binary code) as general matrix to attribute and explain intimate behavior, with the effect of naturalizing gender as an inescapable horizon (Crawford 2004) for conflict resolution. Aside from its incompatibility with the idea of intimate citizenship, the framework cannot handle semantic trends framing gender difference as a source of unhappiness in intimate relationships.

¹² We are not witnessing a crisis of the *code* of love, as Longo claims (2024: 200), rather the evolution of the programming due to emerging problems. The coding is invariable and cannot undergo a “crisis”, rather its application is semantically reconfigured (*reprogrammed*). Similarly, it is system-theoretically unwarranted to claim that we are experiencing the “end” of love. We should rather ask for what problem the semantic production revolving around the idea of a “crisis” of love (to which sociologists enthusiastically contribute) is a possible solution (Knudsen 2010).

in the intimate system causes its paradoxical unfolding, as we will show: the boundary of what *ego* can accept (to validate) from *alter* lies in *ego*'s acceptance (and validation) of *ego*'s own self and worldview. Hence, the present problem for intimate relationships, and for interpersonal interpenetration, lies in the question of the dyadic limitations to unconditional acceptance: “what should I / you / we accept?”.

In what follows, we develop this core idea and provide examples stemming from our research, available scholarship, and recent North American relationship advice literature.

4. The program of acceptance: features and examples

The program of acceptance responds to the problem of treating irritations stemming from symmetrical claims to individuality in intimate relationships, in a context where the latter are expected to provide a safe haven of equal recognition for highly individualized persons¹³. Acceptance preserves a preference for the positive value of the code of love when the high individualization of motives warrants both individual claims (by *ego* and by *alter*) and the expectation of their mutual validation. The improbability of intimate relationship is not linked to the atomizing effect of demands for individual rights (such as feminist or queer movements), rather to rising expectations that love unfold as mutual support between self-affirming individualities (Langhamer 2013; Luhmann 1986a, ch. 16; Finkel 2017). Paradoxically, *acceptance* facilitates the increase of interpersonal interpenetration through the explicit inclusion of the awareness of the boundaries of interpenetration. Put otherwise, the program allows to read as a sign of love the communicated, active (and not just forced) acceptance of the irreducible character of individual difference as the fundamental ground for love itself – i.e. a radicalization of the idea of loving someone for who they are (and expecting to be loved for who one is). Luhmann had already observed that, in the late twentieth century, love semantics was less hinged on the idea of “shared values and goals” – a therapeutic reframing of the romantic ideal of merging lifeworlds – than on the partners’ mutual recognition of “the right to their own world” (1986a: 176). If *understanding*

¹³ “As an individual, one is free to define one’s own claims but vis-à-vis individuals who claim the same freedom. Everyone needs to recognize and accept that everyone else defines what their respective world, their interests, and their enjoyment consist of. One cannot deny others [...] their right to self-determination, and therefore everyone is sovereign in acknowledging or rejecting the claims of others.” (Luhmann 2022: 295).

was a first, limited attempt at validating this right, *acceptance* further defuses the irritating impact of individuality by decoupling the attribution of the positive value of the code from dyadic agreement on how the world is experienced. As Luhmann observed for *understanding*, the program of acceptance teaches how to treat every day non-proofs of love (Luhmann 2012: 233) and boundary statements – everyday moments that don’t display devotion – as compatible with ongoing love: but *acceptance* makes this compatibility conditional on reciprocity, accountability, and autonomy.

In our qualitative study with fifty adult Canadian individuals¹⁴, most participants highlighted the importance of sharing activities and interests with the partner(s), but also insisted on the “healthy” effect of each partner having their own interests, friendships, and activities (as Gabb and Fink [2015] also observed in British couples). Participants flagged as “unhealthy” any lack of symmetry in the partners’ ability to take initiative (e.g. suggest or organize activities), be autonomous (e.g. handle chores or errands by themselves), or feel comfortable on their own. Not only individual difference must be acknowledged, but also accountably cultivated. In his research on partnered adult Canadians engaging in multi-partner sexual practices, Dusseau (2025) found that participants reported managing a threefold allegiance: loyalty to themselves (i.e. affirm their individual desires and demand that they are fulfilled), loyalty to their partner(s) (i.e. respect and accept their desires and needs), and loyalty to the relationship (i.e. demonstrate their commitment to the dyadic project and not only to the personal project of self-fulfilment). These results align with the core logics of *acceptance*: relationships can fulfil individual desires for happiness if maintaining shared spaces is balanced with each partner’s cultivation of their own space. Both endeavors must be ongoingly communicated in the relationship (that is, neither can be routinized if it has to count as proof of love), whereas self-renouncing counts as a sign of unhealthy (or, in current parlance, *toxic*) love.

Here the program of acceptance draws on leading themes of the therapeutic semantics. Recent relationship advice literature abundantly instructs on self-improvement, self-awareness,

¹⁴ Phase 2 of the *Mapping Contemporary Love and Intimacy Ideals in Canada* project (2021-2026, funded by SSHRC) consisted in 50 semi-directed interviews with Canadian adults (January-October 2024). Participants were invited to discuss their current relationship status, present and past relationship(s), their conception of love, sexuality, monogamy and non-monogamy, relationship optimality, their household work and financial arrangements (see Piazzesi, Blais et Renaud 2025).

and self-‘protection’: consistent with the criticism of the (romantic) “merger”, personal autonomy, independence, self-respect and authenticity are now central to a successful love life (Madsen [2014] observed this trend as of the 2000s). In Nasserzadeh’s *Love by Design* (2024), the author recommends the “1+1=3” rule, which makes the program explicit: the couple must maintain two selves and a shared space, which should not dissolve into one another. According to bestselling relationship coach Matthew Hussey’s latest book, *Love life* (2024), the core challenge of intimacy is striking the right balance between accepting and loving oneself and accepting and loving the partner. A full chapter on self-love instructs the readership on accepting themselves with kindness, acknowledge their needs and desires, be accountable without self-blame, and *consequently* find someone who can support this sense of self. Ideas of individual psychological hardwiring are treated as basis for individual claims, where acceptance of others is conditional on self-acceptance, and the latter implies a duty to not obliterate one’s self in love. Jessica Fern’s *Polysecure* (2020), intended to help people in consensual non-monogamous relationship find happiness through the principles of attachment theory, includes a chapter on how to be securely attached to oneself – a rather heterodox notion for classical attachment theory. The chapter discusses the advantages of “solo-polyamory”, which literature defines as a form of consensual non-monogamy where people form brief, non-hierarchical connections with partners, set clear boundaries to expectations, prioritize personal autonomy, and often continue to consider themselves single (Lavender-Stott, 2023). Paradoxically, the logics of acceptance entails that a successful love life can be found in relinquishing any (traditional) dyadic project.

Consistently with the requirements of self-referentiality that structure acceptance, the option of relinquishing love and “opting out” is part of the program for love, as Luhmann had already observed (1986a:155). Self-acceptance, with the corresponding claims, can legitimately outweigh acceptance of *alter* whenever the integrity of *ego*’s self is threatened. Podcasts, magazines, social media (White and Hanley 2023), and self-help literature teach that relationships can be not only hard, but even harmful. Self-disclosure and the effects of individual psychological hardwiring can become a burden within close relationships, a warning that self-help literature extends to friendship (Eramian, Mallory & Herbert 2023) and parental bonds (e.g. Gibson 2015). As feminist popular literature began developing some decades ago, we are warned about “dangerous” personalities out there, whose impact on oneself could be fatal. “Narcissistic” (whether this be a professional diagnosis or a commonsensical placeholder for selfish, oblivious

behavior [Joly 2024]) and “emotionally immature” people (e.g. parents [Gibson 2015]) are identified as damaging *because* they are unable to acknowledge their “problem”. How long, and why should *ego* bear the brunt of harmful behavior out of love for an unaccountable *alter*? Current semantic elaboration appears to prioritize self-protection over bonds: breaking off a love relationship or estrangement from damaging parents and sibling are now acceptable solutions (Gibson 2015; Coleman 2021; Blake 2017). *Ego* has the right and the responsibility to assess the risks for themselves, as self-acceptance and self-love require as much compassion as they entail a learning and vigilance duty (which in turn entails self-knowledge). Ending ‘toxic’ relationships is a moral duty of the autonomous self, whose salience emerged in other spheres of society before percolating into intimacy: in professional or personal matters, autonomy is understood as a condition of possibility of real commitment (Pugh 2015). But autonomy demands accountability, which is conditional on self-knowledge and self-acceptance, hence on the ability for second-order self-observations. When looking for a partner on dating apps, educated women are increasingly rejecting *a priori* contacts from potential male partners who have not undergone therapy (McCombs 2023; Laborie 2024).

Individual responsibility to detect risks and opportunities is clearly formulated in the recent semantic preference for the distinction “red flags / green flags” (sometimes with a non-informative medium term indicating indifference: “beige flags”). The distinction marks behaviors or relationships one can or is willing to accept and behaviors or relationships one cannot or does not want to accept. Flag language functions as decision-making rule under double contingency: in a recent self-help book, Fenwick (2024) explains that criteria to qualify behaviors are indispensable in a world of “unstable meaning” (p.15) – especially when dealing with individuals, whose intentions cannot be ultimately accessed. Hence, the semantics of green / red flags materializes the duty to self-protect out of self-acceptance, while also deepening the program of acceptance: each person can and must (self-reflectively) organize their preferences, communicate their boundaries, and stake claims for the acceptance thereof in a plausible way, while at the same time committing to accepting *alter*’s ones. Faced with a list of flags, *ego* can decide what to accept based on their own flags, while being aware that *alter* is simultaneously entitled to doing the same. This semantics increases the probability of intimate communication through the enhanced plausibility of individual demands for personalized intimate paths that “respond” to one’s needs and desires (instead of a one-size-fits-all approach). Conditions of plausibility / implausibility are reflected

through the distinction compatible / incompatible, whereby love can't make incompatible individualities compatible (hence the language of "pet peeves" and "quirks" in self-help literature). The program of acceptance organizes selectivity transparently.

Popular psychological typologies, that facilitate attribution-oriented categorizations of individual intimate experience as conditioned by individual ontogenesis, have an equivalent function. Lay versions of attachment theory (see Levine & Heller 2010), the "five love languages" (Chapman 1992), and similar approaches to reducing complexity in personal relationships (including astrological signs) see individual behavior as hardwired by early childhood experiences, hence difficult to change. This form of attribution help partners process disappointment by enabling them to accept that they might not express their love the way the other would desire or expect ("it is my love language", "we have different attachment styles", "it's their astrological sign" [Piazzesi, Blais & Renaud 2025]). Categorizations and distinctions coming from popular psychology can thus work as functional equivalents of the traditional coding of love through passion. If "passion" served to treat as love implausible behaviors from the point of view of social norms, current semantics relieves persons from accountability for unconventional behavior by referring it to hardwired individuality: irritations are differences to manage, not signs of *not-love*. The cost might be essentialization, as compatibility may be seen as limited to "types".

A last example of the unfolding of *acceptance* is the rise of consensual non-monogamy (CNM). CNM's ethical framing can be summarized as follows: based on their individuality, *ego* has (or will have) needs and desires that cannot be not met by *alter* due to *alter*'s individuality, whether in general or at certain stages of the relationship. *Ego* cannot demand of *alter* that they change drastically to become the person that can meet *ego*'s needs, and *alter* cannot ask of *ego* that they violate self-acceptance: both must accept a region of incompatibility out of self-acceptance and acceptance of the other. This bestows on *ego* the right (or the responsibility?) to try and fulfil their needs and desires elsewhere, with other partners, which *alter* has the responsibility to accept. The program of acceptance treats this lack of total attuning as structural, not as failure, and supplies procedures: negotiated conditions, vetoes, disclosure, and time management protocols. Often coded as the opposite of jealousy, "compersion" instructs on how to validate a partner's enjoyment of their intimate experiences with someone else (Flicker *et al.* 2022). Compersion defies the traditional semantic framing of intimate relationships, according to which love could be love of only one person (or, later on, of only one person at the time).

Acceptance has an additional paradoxical outcome, in that it makes room for the plausibility of demands which threaten the traditional definition of the intimate system by blurring its boundaries or, put otherwise, by making the boundaries of interpersonal interpenetration visible and explicitly communicable to avoid threatening individual autonomy (Bröning 2025).

Interestingly, the program of acceptance seems to complete the trivialization of love that Luhmann observed in *Love as Passion*. Excess, loss of self-control, and lack of measure in expressing love have lost the salience bestowed upon them by the semantics of passion, and are now qualified as unacceptable. ‘Love-bombing’ and ‘trauma-dumping’ (i.e. indiscriminate self-disclosure) signal a breach of measured boundary-work and reciprocity, and are now coded as red flags (Hussey 2024). Restraint, patience, and reflexivity – or the skills of a self-conscious, autonomous self – count as better proofs of relationship capability. As Jillian Turecki (2025) formulates it in a recent self-help book, the problem of love is indeed the interplay between individual and dyadic assessment of what can be accepted: loving someone implies not trying to change them¹⁵, rather to take them as they come, with “their past and their struggles” (p. 64). Everyone is entitled to acceptance: “we want to be accepted for who we are. [...]. And if we want that, how can we expect not to give that acceptance to someone else?” (Turecki 2025: 64). The limit to acceptance is set by its reciprocity and self-referentiality: “we have to be able to distinguish between having tolerance for the imperfections we all come with and recognizing what is truly intolerable.” (Turecki 2025: 65). Love is no longer the incontrollable force that brings people together independently of their will, rather a choice and commitment of autonomous persons who mutually assess their respective ability to support one another’s sense of self. The self-referentiality of romantic semantics, where the lover’s self was the only legitimate source of love for the beloved’s self, unfolds in its logical consequences. The paradoxicality of acceptance comes to light: acceptance is encouraged while its reciprocity implies that, simultaneously, the range of what is acceptable shrinks. Hence, the program legitimates and justifies the end of the relationship as resulting from the necessarily restricted scope of acceptance based on the encounter between individual idiosyncratic claims.

¹⁵ As required by therapeutic semantics and the semantics of individuality, only the self can be a legitimate source of the requirement to change: one can only grow if they willfully strive to do so (see Koontz et al. 2019 for an example of the circulation of this semantic repertoire, which is explicitly opposed to traditional, “unrealistic” romantic ideals).

5. Concluding remarks

Our analysis employed Luhmann's concept of "program" to account for recent evolutions of love semantics and connect them to social changes in the last four decades. While our main focus was North America, most of our findings can likely be generalized to other countries in the Global North (Gabb & Fink 2025; Lipnicka 2025; Power 2023; Prandini 2016). We have shown that semantic shifts respond to and foster structural changes in intimate relationships, but also in society more generally, with individual inclusion in a functionally differentiated society being the main problem that semantics of individuality and program of love attempt to treat. In a context characterized by the preference for second-order observations, i.e. the awareness that "all world experiences are becoming contingent" and that "*what* is observed depends on *who* is being observed" (Luhmann 1998: 48), intimate relationships are regarded as loci for validation of individuals preoccupied with anchoring their claims to individuality. The fascinating paradoxicality of the current semantics of individuality combines the contingency of personal experiences with the assertion of their reality, notably through the belief in the factuality of patterns, or "latent structures" (Luhmann 1998: 49) that must be unveiled, taken into account, and owned by the individual as inescapable constituents of their self.

Without weakening the preference for second-order observations, the program of acceptance instructs on handling individual idiosyncrasies as realities of the relationship, and as the likely source of irritations and disappointment, but it also provides the symmetry that recent demands for equality have made unavoidable (at least in principle). In the program of acceptance, we witness the affirmation of individual interest in self-realization as a condition of possibility for love, perhaps even as its *modus operandi*, and as the necessary, healthy "boundary" to selflessness and (formerly unconditional) validation of the other's interest in self-fulfillment. Logics of reciprocity and equity create a space of legitimacy for individual claims while discouraging a dissolution into selflessness or a stiffening into selfishness – hence curbing the improbability of intimate communication. As Luhmann hypothesized at the end of *Love as Passion*, we witness the re-introduction of "notions based on exchange", that had been excluded from the code of love in the past. While Luhmann observed that it was "impossible to specify how selflessness and an orientation to the other person could become embedded as a dominant motif in a broader and deeper understanding of exchange" (1986a: 162), the program of acceptance indicates a path for

this integration. *Acceptance* combines traditional requirements of selflessness with recent semantic themes affirming the individual's "legitimate interest" not only in self-preservation, but in self-fulfilment and in "owning" one's life path. Two centuries of semantic evolution have coalesced into a general awareness of the ineffectiveness of selflessness in preventing the end of love: recent semantic material emphasizes its deleterious consequence – such as self-annihilation, abuse, loss of meaning, dependency, lack of symmetry in initiative, or excessive predictability. The task ahead is now to observe the program's self-revision and its further couplings with therapeutic semantics, legal arrangements, or mass media, in order to chart the re-entry of paradoxes and grasp the consequences of the deployment of *acceptance* for love relationships. Further, research is needed to trace how acceptance percolates into law and politics as a semantics that widens inclusion, while contemporary challenges to minority rights question the boundaries of the "acceptable." In this process, queer and feminist rights and claims have become exemplars whereby such boundaries are tested.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical clearance was issued by the Université du Québec à Montréal Human Research Ethics Board (Certification # 2022-4196).

Written informed consent was provided by all participants.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study can be made partially available upon request to the corresponding author and with the approval of the Université du Québec à Montréal Human Research Ethics Board. The data are not publicly accessible because they contain potentially sensitive participant information, which could jeopardize their privacy and violate the written confidentiality agreement with participants.

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