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The Benevolence of True Love in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Universal Meanings and Local Practices

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Is love a transient emotion or an enduring action? Exploring cross-cultural models, psychometrics, and neuroscience, this article demonstrates that love's universal core is ***active benevolence***. Discover how diverse cultural traditions and human biology unite around a foundational reality: true love is defined by what we do good things for others and help them flourish.

Introduction: The Cross-Cultural Core of Loving Action

The feelings, thoughts, and acts of doing good for the one you love represent the features central to the concept of love across diverse cultures and historic eras. Scholars in diverse disciplines have conceptualized universal meanings of love as active benevolence expressed through active care, goodwill, and sacrificial consideration of the interests of others. This cross-cultural conceptualization may serve as a more fundamental and enduring core meaning for various forms of love than the transient experiences of affection, passion, intimacy, or commitment alone. Active benevolence—manifested through tangible support, shared duty, and practical goodwill—acts as the primary and core phenomenology that sustains human emotions and relationships.

Throughout human history, across cultural models, and local practices, the central motivation to do good things for a partner, family member, or neighbor has been a foundational pillar of positive human connection that we call love.

Love as Active Benevolence Across Cultural Paradigms

At its conceptual core, benevolence reflects a sustained commitment to fostering the well-being of another. While classical relationship science in Western contexts has heavily prioritized internal emotional states—such as passion, emotional intimacy, or subjective attachment—cross-cultural paradigms offer a broader operational framework (Karandashev, 2017, 2019). Across diverse cultural traditions, active benevolence and intentional goodwill are frequently conceptualized as the essential core of love rather than a secondary outcome.

Rather than remaining an abstract feeling or a passive affective response, benevolent love manifests as a concrete behavioral orientation. Cross-cultural research indicates that while emotional intensity and romantic passion fluctuate significantly across relationship stages and cultural settings, the

motivation to actively perform supportive actions provides a stable baseline to sustain interpersonal relationships. By examining benevolence across cultures and societies, the science of love shifts focus from love as an internal emotional state to love as an active, generative practice embedded within social and familial networks (Karandashev, 2017, 2019, 2022).

Are People Benevolent by Nature?

Philosophers, evolutionary biologists, and behavioral scientists have long debated whether human beings are innately benevolent. Modern evolutionary psychology and behavioral economics suggest that humans possess evolutionary mechanisms designed for pro-sociality, empathy, compassion, and benevolence. However, scholars repeatedly emphasize the necessity of distinguishing between the broader concept of “altruism” (often measured via fitness costs or functional prosocial acts) and “benevolence” (the intentional psychological motivation to seek another’s good) (Jencks, 1990; Nunney, 2000).

The expression and developmental trajectory of human benevolence depend heavily on social, environmental, and structural conditions (Flescher & Worthen, 2007; Jellal & Wolff, 2002; Nunney, 2000; Sober & Wilson, 1998). Historical and cross-cultural analyses generally align with the view that humans possess a nearly universal capacity for benevolence and caregiving (Karandashev, 2017, 2019). Nevertheless, scholars must acknowledge that human history is equally marked by adversity, tribalism, and aggression—forces that frequently restrict the boundary of who is deemed worthy of benevolent concern.

The Lexical Diversity and Universality of Love as a Concept

Anthropological and psycholinguistic investigations demonstrate that cultural understandings of love vary significantly across geographic regions, cultures, and historical periods (Karandashev, 2017, 2019). This variability presents profound methodological challenges when attempting to construct a unified cross-cultural lexicon of love.

In many languages, no single, overarching abstract noun directly corresponds to the English word “love.” Linguistic anthropologists note that “love” as a high-level abstract category can be too diffuse to capture the specific operational realities of human relational life (Karandashev, 2017, 2019). Instead, languages often deploy specialized vocabularies tailored to distinct relational contexts—differentiating explicitly between maternal devotion, filial duty, kin solidarity, romantic attraction, and lifelong marital partnership (Karandashev, 2022).

Specific emotion and relationship terms have evolved in response to localized cultural imperatives and historical structures (Karandashev, 2017, 2019, 2022). Rather than relying on a single umbrella term, cultures frequently organize their relational lexicons around distinct behavioral expectations, social responsibilities, and emotional nuances.

The Universal Semantic Core of Love

Despite this vast lexical diversity, linguists searching for semantic universals have identified underlying structural commonalities across human languages. Through the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), linguistic researcher Anna Wierzbicka has demonstrated that while the surface vocabulary of love varies, human societies share a foundational conceptual core regarding what it means to care for another.

Wierzbicka (1999) posited that the universal semantic core of love across cultures can be articulated through a simple, standardized linguistic formula:

"Person X does good things for person Y."

This semantic reduction highlights that across diverse linguistic traditions, the essence of love is defined primarily by the evident motivation to perform good acts for another's well-being and flourishing. True love, in its most cross-culturally universal definition, is fundamentally benevolent love.

Cross-Cultural Expressions of Benevolent Love

The cross-cultural concept of benevolent love for all and everyone is present far beyond Western and Eastern cultures, far beyond Christian and Confucian religious traditions. This type of benevolent love has its own lexicon in many languages (Lomas, 2018). Here are key cultural and linguistic expressions of this phenomenon:

- **Greco-Roman Antiquity:** Classical Greek philosophy articulated *agape* as a selfless, benevolent form of love extended not only to family but to strangers and other people at large. Classical Roman philosophy adapted this concept through *caritas*, emphasizing unconditional care, charity, and active goodwill toward others.
- **Eastern Philosophical Traditions:** In ancient Chinese philosophy, the Confucian concept of *ren* (仁) denotes foundational benevolence, empathy, and human-heartedness, serving as the essential moral virtue guiding social relationships. Furthermore, the Indian Sanskrit word *maitrī* signifies universal benevolence and loving-kindness, while the term *mettā* represents the traditional Buddhist concept for loving-kindness toward all living beings without attachment or expectation.
- **Abrahamic and Indigenous Perspectives:** In Jewish tradition, the Yiddish phrase *gemilut hasadim* (acts of loving-kindness) describes a fundamental social and ethical imperative going beyond

formal legal obligations to active personal service. Among Arctic Indigenous populations, the Inuit word *pittiarniq* expresses the meaning of benevolent care, kindness, and active helpfulness essential for community survival.

- **African and Middle Eastern Humanism:** The Southern African Nguni Bantu word *ubuntu* ("I am because we are") encapsulates the essential interconnectedness of humanity, bearing the meaning of benevolent love for all others and humanity overall. Similarly, the Pashto language of Persian origins features the word *melmastyā´*, which essentially conveys the meaning of welcoming love, hospitality, and protection offered whether to members of one's own tribe or to unknown travelers.

I could provide many other cultural and linguistic examples that show the benevolent nature of love (Karandashev, 2022).

Empirical Perspectives on Love as Benevolence Across Disciplines

Contemporary empirical research across cross-cultural psychology, relationship science, and neuroscience reinforces these historical and linguistic conceptualizations of love, demonstrating that benevolent love functions as a distinct and vital dimension of interpersonal relationships that we call "love".

Psychometric Validation of Love as Active Benevolence

Psychometric frameworks designed to assess love across cultural contexts emphasize that active benevolence operates as a distinct dimension alongside passion, intimacy, and commitment (Karandashev & Evans, 2019;

Karandashev et al. 2022; Sternberg, 1986). In scale validation studies examining multidimensional models of love, items measuring active care, altruistic support, and unconditional goodwill consistently emerge as robust predictors of long-term relationship stability and subjective well-being across diverse cultural samples (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Karandashev, 2019, 2022; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). The features of love as benevolent care maintain a high degree of structural stability across cultures (Karandashev & Evans, 2019; Karandashev et al. 2022).

Neurobiological Correlates of Compassionate Love

Neuroimaging studies examining compassionate and benevolent love reveal distinct neural activation patterns that differ from those associated with early-stage romantic passion or sexual desire (Post, 2005; Singer et al., 2006). Research utilizing functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) demonstrates that feelings of unconditional benevolent love engage subcortical reward structures (such as the ventral tegmental area) alongside central oxytocinergic and vasopressinergic pathways associated with long-term pair bonding, empathy, and caregiving networks (e.g., the ventral striatum and the periaqueductal gray) (Brown et al., 2005; Moll et al., 2006). These neurobiological findings indicate that benevolence is grounded in mammalian caregiving systems evolved to maintain long-term social cohesion and offspring protection (Brown & Brown, 2006; Carter, 1998).

Cross-Cultural Variations in Behavioral Norms of Benevolent Love

While the internal imperative to “do good for another” appears to share a universal semantic core, cross-cultural psychologists highlight that the specific behavioral manifestations recognized, expected, and valued as benevolent are

deeply shaped by cultural ecology and social organization (Karandashev, 2017, 2019; Triandis, 1995).

In highly individualistic cultural contexts—predominantly found in Western industrialized nations—benevolent love is frequently expressed through verbal affirmation, emotional validation, encouragement of personal goals, and respect for individual autonomy and self-actualization (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Conversely, in interdependent and collectivist societies across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, benevolent love is predominantly manifested through practical assistance, shared labor, financial support, fulfillment of family obligations, and unspoken, duty-bound acts of service (Hofstede, 2001; Karandashev, 2019). Within collectivist relational frameworks, sacrificing personal desires for the collective welfare of the family or community is viewed not as a burden, but as the highest expression of care and affection. Understanding these divergent cultural expressions is vital for avoiding ethnocentric biases when evaluating relationship quality, attachment styles, and interpersonal satisfaction across diverse global populations (Karandashev, 2019, 2022).

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