

# Cultural and gender-related differences of concepts of love between Iranian and Swiss adults based on Hafez' poetry of love

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## Abstract

Falling and being in love is a cross-cultural universal. The poet Khwaja Šams ud-Din Muhammad Hafez-e Širazi, or simply Hafez (14<sup>th</sup> century D.C.), an important influence for both Persian and European culture, is noted for his love poetry. The first aim of the present study was to check to what extent items of a current questionnaire of love match themes of love found in Hafez' poetry. Then, we explored gender- and cultural differences in the importance of these themes. First, themes of Hafez's poems were compared with the items of Fisher's "Being in Love Inventory". Second, a set of items was presented to Iranian and Swiss female and male adult participants ( $N=325$ ; age (years):  $M = 31.29$ ;  $SD = 16.28$ ; 161 Iranian; 164 Swiss). Generally, cultural differences were weak. Female participants agreed more with the assumption of love as taking one away from reality. Swiss male participants reported an increased ambivalence towards the partner, and Iranian female participants reported an increased fear of being betrayed. Our results seem to confirm that Hafez's themes of love are still up-to-date, and that falling and being in love is a cross-cultural universal, though with some subtle cultural and gender-related differences.

**Keywords:** Falling and being in love, cross-cultural comparison, Hafez' poetry, gender differences.

Intense romantic love is a cross-cultural universal (Fisher, 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 2006; Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992). Furthermore, romantic love has an important impact on feelings of self-worth (Conolly & Goldberg, 1999), on identity formation and on the capacity for intimacy (Florsheim, 2003; Kroger, 2000).

Early-stage intense romantic love is marked by clear and substantial modifications at physiological, psychological and behavioral levels (Fisher, 1998; Leckman & Mayes, 1999). Specific physiological changes include sweaty palms,

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pounding heart, and increased and excessive energy while being with the beloved person, reflecting sympathetic nervous system activity (Fisher, 2005). Cognitive and emotional changes involve dimensions such as an intense focused attention on the target individual, obsessive, intrusive and persistent thinking about her or him, emotional dependency on and craving for emotional union with the beloved, euphoria, elation, mood swings, and extreme empathy and distorted altruism, leading the enamored to be 'willing to die for' her or his beloved. Concerning behavior, people in early-stage intense romantic love are goal-directed and change their habits to impress or remain in contact with the beloved. Finally, people in love express their sexual desire as well as an intense sexual possessiveness (for an overview see Fisher, 2005; Aron et al., 2005). Fisher (1998) suggested that behavioral aspects of early-stage intense romantic love are comparable to cocaine-reward producing exhilaration, excessive energy, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite.

With regard to the conceptualization of early-stage intense romantic love, cultural critics point out that until very recently, social psychology focused exclusively on western culture. Such ethnocentrism is a mistake, as culture may have a profound impact on the ways in which people think about the world, the meaning they ascribe to common life events, and the manner in which they react to those events (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Passionate love, for example, is known to be a universal emotion. Yet, culture has been found to have a profound impact on people's definitions of love and on the way they think, feel, and behave in romantic settings (Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007). Cross-cultural studies provide a glimpse into the complex world of passionate love and allow us to gain an understanding of the extent to which people's emotional lives are written in their cultural and personal histories, as opposed to their genes and evolutionary history (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992).

In this view, we wanted to discuss the poetry of Khwaja Šams ud-Din Muhammad Hafez-e Širazi, or simply Hafez:

خواجہ شمس الدین محمد حافظ شیرازی

Hafez, a Persian mystic and poet, was born sometime between the years 1310 and 1337 in Shiraz, Medieval Persia. He is considered as one of the three greatest poets of the world (cf. Browne, 1928/1999). Hafez' lyrical poems, known as *ghazals*, are noted for their beauty and bring to fruition the love, mysticism, and early Sufi themes that had long pervaded Persian poetry. His work strongly influenced eastern and western poetry. Goethe recognized Hafez as his Spiritual Master and as a poetic genius, and his book *West-Eastern Divan* was highly influenced by Hafez' *Divan*. Nietzsche, in

his book *The Joyful Wisdom*, praised Hafez for “mocking divinely.” In *The Will to Power*, he observed:

Only the most enlightened of beings can benefit from the deepest human joys because within such beings resides a unique force of freedom and rapture. Their awareness rests in the house of spirit and their soul mates with their awareness, meaning that which shines in the soul is known with awareness. This unity of spirit and mind is the legacy of Hafez.’ (Nietzsche, 1973)

The UNESCO, the United Nations educational and Cultural arm, officially declared 1988 the "Year of Hafez" and conducted a conference in Paris to honor the poet and explore the significance of his teachings for the modern world (reference: [www.Hafezofshiraz.com/englishtrans3.html](http://www.Hafezofshiraz.com/englishtrans3.html))

Hafez is also the most famous Persian poet in Iran and there is a book of his works in almost every Iranian home. His love sonnets reflect the kind of love that appeals to the typical Persian.

Browne (1928/1999) identified the following main themes in Hafez poems<sup>2</sup>:

1. Love as an aid in turning away from the world; that is: In many of Hafez’ poems, the lover is preoccupied with love. He loses an interest in sociability and does not care for social interactions, except for those with the beloved person.

2. The superiority of the beloved over her lover; the lover idealizes his beloved. She is without flaw and in no way dependent on the lover’s love or largess. The lover is symbolized as a beggar and the beloved as a king or queen.

3. The lover possesses an ambivalent attitude toward separation from his beloved. The lover is dominated by an anxiety related to both fears that the union is unattainable, and a sense of insecurity felt in every second of the time of union. Consequently, although the lover usually complains about separation, at times he welcomes it, as if he can tolerate separation more easily than the sense of insecurity he feels in the time of union.

4. The lover is preoccupied by fears of betrayal, and plagued by a constant anxiety that the beloved could be unfaithful to him.

Therefore, the study had two aims: First, we estimated the degree of actuality of Hafez’ themes of love by relating them to the items of Helen Fisher’s “Being in Love

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<sup>2</sup> Browne (1928/1999) also identified a fifth theme, the beloved being portrayed as a murderer who decides to kill the lover. However, because no corresponding items could be found in Fisher’s “Being in Love Inventory” (2004), we excluded this theme from further consideration.

Inventory” (2004). Second, we explored possible differences between Iranian and Swiss adult female and male participants. Comparing answers given by people from different cultures and of different genders may allow us to broaden the view of how falling and being in love may differ nowadays.

## Methods

### *Sample*

A total of 354 participants took part in the study. Of those, 29 (10 Iranian and 19 Swiss participants) had missing data higher than 5% and were excluded from further analyses (Schafer & Graham, 2002). The final sample consisted of 325 participants; 161 had an Iranian origin (77 females and 84 males), and 164 had a Swiss origin (112 females, 52 males). There was a significant difference in gender distribution between the two groups ( $X^2(1) = 13.98, p = .000$ ), with more female participants in the Swiss group, compared to the Iranian group. Whereas there was no statistically significant difference of age between the two groups ( $F(1, 321) = 0.12, p = .73$ ; Iranian:  $M = 31.82$ ;  $SD = 20.55$ ; Swiss:  $M = 30.76$ ;  $SD = 12.02$ ), there was a statistically significant difference in age between the genders ( $F(1, 321) = 7.12, p = .008$ ; females:  $M = 29.26$ ;  $SD = 19.55$ ; males:  $M = 37.10$ ;  $SD = 11.38$ ). The statistically significant Group by Gender interaction ( $F(1, 321) = 4.88, p = .03$ ) revealed that compared to the Iranian group, female Swiss participants were significantly younger, and male Swiss participants were significantly older.

To recruit participants, the study was electronically posted on the homepages of different universities in Iran and Switzerland. Additional participants were recruited through word-of-mouth-recommendation.

### *Selection of items*

First, among the variety of themes in Hafez’ poems related to love, we chose the main topics identified by Browne (1928/1999), that is: 1. Love as an aid in turning away from the world; 2. The superiority of the beloved over her lover; 3. The lover possesses an ambivalent attitude toward separation from his beloved; 4. The lover is preoccupied by fears of betrayal. Second, we descriptively compared these themes with Helen Fishers (2004) questionnaire called “Being in Love” and chose those items which best

fitted with the dimensions mentioned above (see Table 1). Fisher's questionnaire consists of a series of items related to different topics of falling and being in love. Answers are given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (=strongly agree).

Table 1. Items from Fisher's (2004) questionnaire that were used to operationalize the themes of love found in Hafez' poems (see text). Answers were given on a 7-point scale with the anchor points 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (= strongly agree). The higher the score, the more a person agreed with the sentence. \* = This item has been slightly modified.

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**1 Love as an aid in turning away from the world.**

When I'm in love, I have a hard time sleeping because I'm thinking about him/her.  
 The person that I'm infatuated with is the center of my life.  
 When I'm in class/at work my mind wanders to him/her.  
 Not matter where it starts, my mind always seems to end up thinking about him/her.  
 If I'm with him/her, I forget everything else around me.  
 If I'm with him/her, I can forget all my worries and problems.

**2. The Superiority of the Beloved Over His or Her Lover**

Sometimes I feel awkward, shy, and inhibited when I am around him/her.  
 In our relationship he/she is dominant.  
 He/she is actually aggressive and decisive.  
 Actually, I have less power than he/she has.

**3 The Lover Possesses an Ambivalent Attitude Toward Separation from the Beloved.**

He/She has some faults but they don't really bother me.  
 When the relationship with him/her has a setback, I just try harder to get things going right.  
 When the relationship with him/her has a setback, I'm not sure what he/she is thinking about us\*.  
 My relationship with my closest friends is more important to me than my relationship with him/her.  
 Sometimes, I would prefer to spend more time alone.\*  
 Sometimes, I would prefer that she/he would make up her/his mind about us.\*

**4 The lover is Preoccupied with fears of Betrayal**

Being sexually faithful is important when you are in love.  
 I go through periods of despair when I think he/she might not love me.  
 I'm not sure about my partner's faithfulness.  
 I often wonder whether he/she is as passionate about me as I am about him/her.  
 I deeply hope that he/she as attracted to me as I am to him/her.  
 I'm occupied by fears of betrayal.\*

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Four independent raters rated to which extent the selected items did match Hafez' themes. Cohen's Kappa was  $\kappa = .89$ ; thus the selection of the items was considered very satisfactory.

Third, following the procedure to ensure optimal translations as proposed by Brislin (1986; cf. Angst et al., 2005), the English items were translated into Persian, and back translated into English again by an independent translator. Consensus was reached on a final version that was subjected to the translation–retranslation process.

### *Data collection*

The study was performed as an on-line study. Commercially available software (Globalpark®; [www.globalpark.com](http://www.globalpark.com)) was used to run the study via internet. The software is an easily applicable tool for the creation of internet-based studies irrespective of language and alphabetical characters, which allowed us to perform the study both in German and in Farsi. The software provider guarantees that all data are stored on a server not accessible to who is running a study, that is: the user of the software receives the data related to the questionnaires, but not related to the IP-address of a participant. Thus, data security and anonymity of the participants were ensured. Moreover, to avoid repeated participation, the software blocks participation with an IP-address already used.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and about the voluntary basis of the participation. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and informed consent was obtained on the first page of the questionnaire. Moreover, participants could stop or withdraw from the study without giving any further explication. To enhance compliance, participants could take part in a drawing, though in this case they had to provide an email-address. As a token, ten iPod® Shuffles® were raffled.

Data were automatically gathered in an excel-file® and afterwards converted into a SPSS®-file for further analysis.

### *Statistical analyses*

For the statistical analysis, we aggregated the answers to the individual items. We created averaged scores for each of the 4 themes (see Figure 1), and performed an ANOVA for each theme with the factors Gender (female, male) and Group (Iranian people, Swiss people). Test results with an alpha level of below .05 are reported as significant. Computations were performed with SPSS 15.0® for Windows.

## Results

### *1. Love as an aid in turning away from the world*

There was a main effect for the factor Gender ( $F(1, 321) = 9.73, p = .002$ ) with an increased score for female participants ( $M = 4.83; SD = 1.13$ ; males:  $M = 4.38; SD = 1.34$ ). Neither the factor Group ( $F(1, 321) = 0.20, p = .65$ ; Iranian:  $M = 4.55; SD = 1.31$ ; Swiss:  $M = 4.74; SD = 1.17$ ), nor the Group by Gender interaction ( $F(1, 321) = 2.92, p = .09$ ), were significant. Thus, female participants thought that being in love lead to an increased detachment from reality.

### *2. The superiority of the beloved over his or her lover*

Neither the factor Group ( $F(1, 321) = 2.81, p = .10$ ; Iranian:  $M = 3.59; SD = 1.34$ ; Swiss:  $M = 3.40; SD = 1.21$ ), nor the factor Gender ( $F(1, 321) = 0.87, p = .35$ ; females:  $M = 3.53; SD = 5.05$ ; males:  $M = 3.45, SD = 1.30$ ), nor the Group by Gender interaction ( $F(1, 321) = 1.23, p = .27$ ) were statistically significant. Thus, across cultural background and gender, participants did not differ in the degree of inferiority they felt towards their beloved.

### *3. Ambivalent attitude towards a separation from the beloved*

Neither the factor Group ( $F(1, 321) = 3.34, p = .07$ ; Iranian:  $M = 4.10; SD = 0.88$ ; Swiss:  $M = 4.40; SD = 0.81$ ), nor the factor Gender ( $F(1, 321) = 2.99, p = .09$ ; females:  $M = 4.21; SD = 0.89$ ; males:  $M = 4.26; SD = 0.89$ ) were statistically significant. However, a statistically significant Group by Gender interaction ( $F(1, 321) = 7.09, p = .008$ ) was observed, with highly increased scores for male Swiss participants, that is, male Swiss participants reported an increased ambivalent attitude towards separation from their lover.

### *4. The lover is preoccupied by fears of betrayal*

There was a main effect for the factor Group ( $F(1, 321) = 5.83, p = .016$ ) with an increased score for Iranian participants ( $M = 3.72; SD = 1.13$ ; Swiss:  $M = 3.34; SD =$

0.85). The factor Gender was not significant ( $F(1, 321) = 0.56, p = .46$ ; females:  $M = 3.63$ ;  $SD = 1.06$ ; males:  $M = 3.49$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ). The significant Group by Gender interaction ( $F(1, 321) = 7.60, p = .006$ ) indicated that female Iranian participants were most preoccupied by fears of being betrayed (see Figure 1).

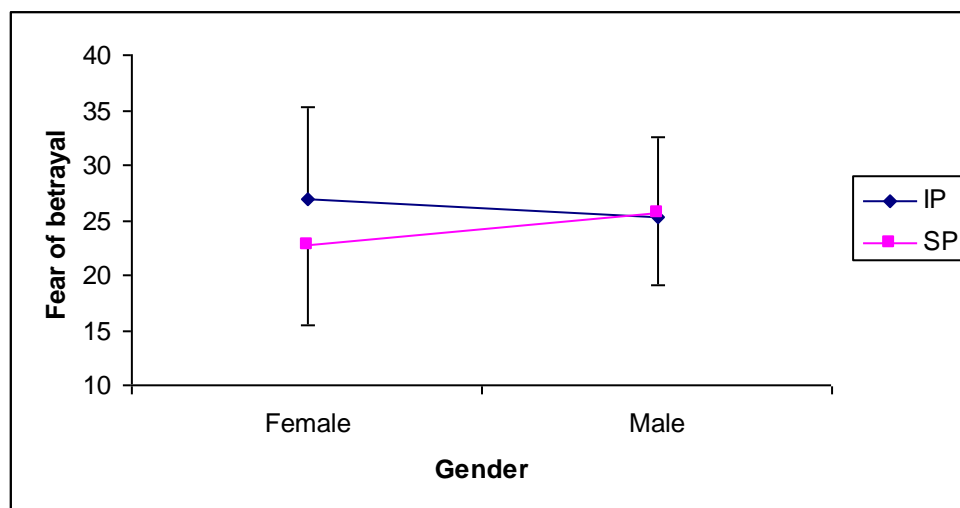


Figure 1. A significant main effect for Group by Gender interaction ( $F(1, 321) = 7.60, p = .006$ ) revealed that female Iranian participants were most preoccupied of being betrayed. IP = Iranian people; SP = Swiss people. The graph shows means and standard deviations.

## Discussion

The key findings of the present study were that four of five themes of Hafez' poems of love could be identified in Fisher's "Being in Love Inventory" (2004), and that Iranian as well as Swiss participants agreed that these items reflected their views of romantic love. In three of these four themes, no differences between Iranian and Swiss adult participants could be found.

With the first procedure, we wanted to check the actuality of Hafez's poems. We could find a series of items in Fisher's "Being in Love Inventory" (2004) with regard to Hafez's themes of (1) "Love as an aid in turning away from the world"; (2) "The superiority of beloved over her/his lover"; (3) "The ambivalent attitude toward the separation from the lover"; and (4) "The lover as being preoccupied by fears of betrayal". Thus, we conclude that Hafez's themes of love have not lost their actuality,



which might explain, why at least in the Persian culture, Hafez's poems are fairly well known and read.

With the second procedure, we wanted to check if and to what extent the perception of Hafez's themes of love do vary as a function of culture (Iranian and Swiss adult participants) and gender. Irrespective of culture, female participants agreed more than men with the statement that being in love takes one away from reality. This "being taken away from reality" by intensively thinking about the beloved has been observed repeatedly (Brand et al., 2007; Fisher, 2004). We speculate that the repeated bouts of a highly increased secretion of testosterone (cf. Marazziti & Canale, 2004) might cause such kind of sensations.

With regard to the theme of superiority of the beloved, no culture- and gender-related differences could be observed. Hence, we conclude that Hafez's theme is up-to-date, though the theme is not perceived as Hafez suggested it; that is, no culture- and gender-related differences in superiority could be observed. In other words: participants do reflect about the issue of parity and disparity within couples, though they do not agree with Hafez' view. However, one might also speculate that answers were given in the light of political correctness and that the pattern of results might not reflect other observations, that is: Following Buss (2008), in love relationships, there is rarely a complete equality.

With regard to the ambivalence towards the partner, an interesting Group by Gender interaction could be observed, with increased scores for Swiss male participants. Again, our data do not allow accessing to the underlying psychological mechanisms, though this pattern of results may fit well with the following observation: Young adult females during early-stage intense romantic love were more satisfied and happier about life than their male counterparts. In contrast, young adult males during early-stage intense romantic love reported lower scores of self-competence and self-worth (Brand et al., in preparation). Thus, though highly speculative, one may claim that for adult females, falling and being in love is more satisfying compared to adult males. In this view, the increased ambivalence of Swiss males towards the partner may reflect this lower degree of satisfaction. How to explain the gap of ambivalence between Swiss and Iranian male participants? We might speculate that in Switzerland cultural rules and agreements are defined in a much broader way compared to Iran. Broadening the rules may include the advantage of increased personal liberty and responsibility, but may also lead to increased insecurity and lower orientation. In our case therefore, the increased

ambivalence of Swiss male participants may reflect a sort of decreased orientation and increased insecurity.

With regard to the last theme, the fear of betrayal, our data support the idea of an increased fear for Iranian females compared to Swiss females and compared to Iranian and Swiss males. To our knowledge, the present data cannot be confirmed or rejected by other published data. Insofar, we cannot evaluate why and to which extent the fear of betrayal of Iranian female adults may be justified or not. Moreover, we might speculate that betrayal (and divorce) might have a more striking negative impact for Iranian than for Swiss female adults. On the other hand, the direction of the gender difference in the Iranian participants is consistent with the observation of increased emotional and sexual jealousy in females compared to males (cf. Buss, 2008).

However, the following question arises: “Is Hafez’s love a pathological love?”, that is to say: Is Hafez’ behavior of love pathological?

Some might say “Yes.” Hafez idealized his beloved—likening him or her to a king or queen and devaluating himself to the status of a beggar. He is preoccupied with betrayal, although there is no reason for his fears. He has a paradoxical attitude towards separation—sometimes preferring separation to union. He has masochistic ideas about love and enjoys the idea of being injured by his beloved and at last his love makes him socially isolated.

To decide whether this sort of love is normal or abnormal, however, we first have to define “normality” or “mental health.” As Vaillant and Vaillant (2005) observe:

“The definition of positive mental health, however, is not easy. Several cautionary steps are necessary. One of the step in discussing mental health is to appreciate the caveat that what is defined as “healthy” sometimes depends on geography, culture, and/or the historical moment. The sickle cell trait is unhealthy in New York City, but, in the tropics, where malaria is endemic, the sickling of red blood cells may be life-saving. Punctuality is a virtue in Germany and a failing in Brazil. In the 1940s, paranoid personalities made poor submariners but excellent airplane spotters.

In defining mental health, then the most important cautionary step is to appreciate the danger of contamination by values. Cultural anthropology shows how fallacious any definition of mental health can be. Competitiveness and scrupulous neatness may be healthy in one culture while it is regarded as personality disorder in another. Furthermore, if mental health

is good, what is it good for? The self or the society? For fitting in or for creativity? For happiness or survival? And who should be the judge? It is true that cultural anthropology shows that almost no form of behavior is considered abnormal in all cultures” (pp. 583-584)

So, if we extract the main themes of Hafez’s poems and evaluate them by the criteria of a normal love in a modern western society, one may claim that his protagonists are not normal at all. However, in our opinion, our data support the dimensional view of intense romantic love as a very soft expression of hypomania, between normality and what could be labeled pathological, with possible gender-specific issues (cf. Angst et al., 2003).

Despite the intriguing findings, some limitations warrant against over-generalization. First, the study was performed as an internet-based study. Thus, participants without access to the internet were excluded from participation, and as a consequence, data may be biased. Second, the recruitment of participants may have led to a selection bias with regard to socio-economic status and education. In this view, it is possible that the small differences related to the two cultures (Iran, Switzerland) may be due to the very similar academic and socio-economic background of the participants. Last, we could not assess the underlying psychological mechanisms which lead to the way participants answered to the questions. Further research should assess these mechanisms, too.

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