The association of structural configurations of romantic relationships with beliefs about couple relationships: A social representations study

Alexsandro Luiz de Andrade[1]* y Joao Wachelke[2]

[1] *Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (Brazil)*
[2] *Università degli studi di Padova (Italy)*

Título: La asociación de configuraciones estructurales de las relaciones románticas con las creencias sobre las relaciones de pareja: Un estudio de las representaciones sociales.
Resúmen: El objetivo del estudio fue evaluar el papel de las configuraciones estructurales de las relaciones amorosas en las representaciones sociales acerca de relaciones de pareja. Dos dimensiones se han tenido en cuenta: Tipo de relación y duración de relación, en cuatro diferentes combinaciones: ausencia de relación, relación informal, relación estable corta y larga. Hubo 160 participantes brasileños seleccionados al azar de una muestra de Internet equilibrada por las características de relación y el sexo. Los participantes completaron un cuestionario que contenía datos demográficos, cuestiones acerca de características de su relación y una tarea de asociación con la palabra "relación de pareja", como expresión inductora. El análisis prototípico, una técnica basada en frecuencias y orden de evocaciones, fue empleado para analizar los datos. Los resultados muestran que el amor es el más probable elemento central de los cuatro grupos, y que el cambio de no estar en una relación a tener una relación larga y estable corresponde a una transición entre dos organizaciones estructurales estables a través de una fragmentación de los significados asociados a situaciones intermedias de relación. Se concluye de los resultados que los participantes en las diferentes configuraciones de relación se refieren a una representación única de relaciones de pareja, pero que su expresión está influida por modulaciones específicas asociadas a contextos de relación.
Palabras clave: Relaciones románticas; creencias sobre el amor; duración de relación; configuración de relación; representaciones sociales.

Abstract: The study aimed at evaluating the role of structural configurations of romantic relationships on the social representations about couple relationships. Two dimensions were taken into account: relationship type and relationship duration, in four different block combinations: absence of relationship, informal relationship, short steady and long steady relationship. There were 160 Brazilian participants randomly selected from an internet sample in order to be balanced by relationship characteristics and sex. Participants completed a questionnaire that contained demographic items, items about their relationship characteristics and an association task with 'couple relationship' as the inducting expression. Prototypical analysis, a technique based on frequency counts and evocation ranks, was employed to analyze data. Results show that love was the most likely central element for all four groups, and that the change from not being in a relationship until having a long steady partner corresponds to a transition between two stable organization structures through a fragmentation of meanings associated with intermediate relationship situations. It is concluded from results that participants in different relationship configurations relate to a single representation on couple relationships, but that its expression is influenced by modulations associated with specific relationship contexts.
Key words: Romantic relationships; beliefs on love; relationship duration; relationship configuration; social representations.

Introduction

Getting involved with another person in a romantic way is a central aspect within an individual's life cycle in practically all established cultures, as well as a vital element in the evolution process of mankind (Hatfield, Rapson & Martel, 2007). The union with another person also performs a relevant role in the configuration of interpersonal relationships and in the development of individuals, while at the same time providing one of the most intense and looked for feelings in the life of an adult human being (Cassepp-Borges & Teodoro, 2007). Within a theoretical approach situated at the cognitive organization of relationships, these are understood as products of the relations among cognitions, affect and behavior, seeking internal consistency at the coordination of those three domains (Alferes, 1996).
When different couple relationship configurations are taken into account, it is possible to observe that the meaning of engaging in a relationship with another person is something that is represented, experienced and demonstrated in various

ways. Differences and similarities flow according to the degree of commitment (Sternberg, 1986), perceived quality of the relationship (Fletcher, Simpson & Thomas, 2000), sex (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2002; Fehr & Broughton, 2001), culture (Schmitt, 2006), religion (Lichter & Carmalt, 2008) and personality (White, Hendrick & Hendrick, 2004).

Considering the diversity concerning structural configurations of romantic relationships, the present study aims at contributing to the understanding of how some relevant dimensions – the existence or not of a steady partner, commitment type and relationship duration – might affect the structuring of shared representations on couple relationships.

According to Berscheid (2006), there are four types of love, as classified by various theories. Those four types can be summarized as follows: 1. attachment love is the kind of love that is marked by proximity behavior with the associated or protecting person; the target of such love is normally an older, stronger and more intelligent family member; 2. compassionate love is referred to as altruistic love in certain taxonomies. It is associated with the behavior of providing care and promoting benefits for the other person; 3. companionate love, or liking, is linked to affiliation aspects. The target person for that kind of love involves interpersonal attraction and similarity; and 4. romantic love, also called passionate or erotic love, is normally associated

* **Dirección para correspondencia [Correspondence address]**:
Alexsandro Luiz de Andrade, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicolo-gia, Av. Fernando Ferrari, 514, Campus Universitário de Goiabeiras / UFES, Vitória – ES, BRASIL, CEMUNI VI, 29075-910.
E-mail: alexsandro.deandrade@yahoo.com; joao.wachelke@unipd.it

with sexual behavior and desire, and the act of commitment in a stable union.

Love may mean different things for different people in different cultures and historical moments. This lack of consensus is seen by Berscheid (2006) as one of the critical issues for the progress of research on love. According to Hinde (1997), people attribute different meanings both to the ways in which love experiences are lived and to characteristics and expectations related to the feeling of love. In a cross-cultural study about emotional experiences, Shaver, Wu and Schwartz (1991) observed that young Americans and Italians equalled love to happiness, qualifying it as a very positive experience; on the other hand, young Chinese associated love with sadness, obsession and unrequited love. In Brazil, Bertoldo and Barbará (2006) reported that young people usually represent issues linked to the theme of romantic relationships around friendship, trust, complicity and love.

Within the perspective of beliefs and cognitions about relationships, Hatfield and collaborators (2007) point out that people have different schemes and cognitive models about love. In a model that integrates attachment theory and its stages, Hatfield and Rapson (1996) suggest that people's love schemes have multiple determinants, including children's first affective experiences, the maturation processes of youth and the many experiences acquired in the interaction with the world, with romantic ones among them.

The implicit theories perspective, focusing on schematic aspects of knowledge structures (Ross, 1989), guides the understanding of beliefs on love as a product of fate or as a growth process related to the interactions of individuals taking part on a relationship. Beliefs linked to fate are associated to intense proximity and satisfaction in the initial phases of relationships; beliefs of relationships as related to interaction processes are linked to high agreement in problem-solving strategies and a union for a long period of time (Knee, 1998).

Concerning the relationship duration dimension, Rusbult (1983) points out that with the passing of time relationships of a romantic nature suffer changes in the intensity of intimacy and commitment. As an example, aspects such as satisfaction and relationship investment intensity tend to become more important as the relationships last longer (Impett, Strachman, Finkel & Gable, 2008); with the passing of time the relationship evolves in terms of dyadic interdependence and the adding of stronger individual emotions (Hatfield, 1988). In a recent study, Karwowski-Marques (2008) showed that couples that are together for longer periods have higher relationship quality levels. The author suggests that bigger relationship duration is normally associated with the overcoming of difficulties and a higher degree of positive experiences, which would contribute to the enhancement of marital links.

A second important relationship configuration dimension refers to different possible relationship types. Aloni and Bernieri (2004) hypothesized that there might be differences

in the constitution of schemes on love according to different romantic relationship modalities. Within that perspective, individual experience and knowledge of the object of interest influence the cognitive representations on it. In spite of a lack of consensus in the literature, the authors state that older people, who are usually more experienced regarding love, develop richer schemes on the phenomenon.

Even if the current study does not assess the effects of sex on beliefs or schemes related to love, it is important to stress that it is an important variable that needs to be taken into account. Its influence is noticed already at the level of romantic relationship involvement. Concerning passion, men are more passionate than women, and the latter are better companions than the former (Kim & Hatfield, 2004; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981). In terms of sexual interest, men seem to be more interested in sexual aspects than women, thinking more often on the topic and reporting a higher number of sexual fantasies (Beck, Bozman & Qualtrough, 1991). These sex differences are also reflected in the ways that love is conceived. Women conceive love in terms of emotional experiences and security, whereas men see it as a sexual commitment that is satisfactory (Buss, 2000; Cimbalo & Novell, 1993; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Results from a study about real and ideal partner choices conducted by Medina and collaborators (2007) with stable couples show that men favored physical and sexual attractiveness, socioeconomic level and positive affects when they were choosing their relationship companions. In contrast, women evoked characteristics such as schooling, a wide social network and the absence of sexual experiences. A similar study by Silva and Pereira (2005) showed that a sample of Brazilian women taking part on stable relationships pointed out that being tender, a good companion and possessing high social status are characteristics of interest for a stable relationships companion. It is possible to identify sex differences also in terms of representations on dating, as women associate it with aspects related to friendship and affect and men relate to sexual aspects (Bertoldo & Barbará, 2006).

From a sociopsychological perspective, individuals who take part on relationships with different dimensional configurations may be considered as belonging to groups of people who have different practices regarding a given social object, i.e., the couple relationship. In this sense, we propose the investigation of shared beliefs as social representations (Rouquette & Rateau, 1998; Flament & Rouquette, 2003). Such perspective is compatible with that of implicit theories; Sampaio and collaborators (2000) affirm that social representations function as implicit theories that guide the actions of people, organizing stable thoughts about objects.

A social representation is a structure of beliefs, opinions and information about a social object (Abric, 1994a). The structure of a social representation is organized around two distinguishable cognitive systems. The central core comprises consensual elements that determine representational identity and that manage its structure defining the object or

evaluating it, whereas the peripheral system is most often composed by less shared elements that refer to specific situations, giving flexibility and the possibility to integrate individual knowledge to the representation (Abric, 1994b; Flament, 1994; Lheureux, Rateau & Guimelli, 2008). It is well documented in literature that differences at the level of intensity of practices related to an object and at the level of the undertaking of different practices are associated with social representations with different central systems and with the activation of cognitive schemes of different qualities (Guimelli, 1989; Guimelli & Jacobi, 1990; Guimelli, 1994; Guimelli, 1995; Abric, & Tafani, 1995; Flament, 2001).

It is important to differentiate representations according to relationship practices, here taken into account as two structural configuration dimensions of relationships: relationship duration and relationship type. Thus, it is posited that the formed groups are characterized by similarities in the characteristics of their relationship configurations at the time of data collection.

The present study aims at comparing the representation structures on couple relationship shared by young adults. As a tentative guiding hypothesis, it is expected that differences on the structures of social representations will be identified according to different modalities of relationship type and relationship duration. Sex will only be a control variable, guiding a balanced sample composition to reduce its possible effects.

Method

Participants

The sample was formed by 160 individuals – 81 were male – who were invited to take part on the study through internet invitations in online communities. There were participants from all Brazilian geographic regions. Their mean age was 24.18 years (*SD* = 2.65 years).

Instrument

A questionnaire was made available on an internet website as an electronic form in Portuguese language. It contained participant description items (sex, age, couple relationship situation, geographic residence) and an open-ended associative task, in which participants had to "write down the first five words that came to their minds after reading the word 'couple relationship' ".

Procedures

Several invitations were posted on Brazilian internet forums from a relationship network website. The text explained briefly the theme of research and the tasks involved, and it also contained a web link to the website hosting the questionnaire. Participants were grouped according to their answers to three questionnaire items: 1. whether they were taking part on a couple relationship or not; 2. if they were in a relationship, whether the relationship was informal or stable; and 3. if the relationship was stable, its duration in months.

Based on those data, four participant groups with different configurations in relationship dimensions were created. Those groups are to be understood as block configurations of the relationship type and duration dimensions. A first configuration refers to participants who were not taking part in couple relationships, in what is the equivalent of people involved in a "non-relationship". The second group comprised participants who declared being in informal relationships, a very specific type of relationship marked by low commitment and short duration. The third and fourth groups included participants with stable relationships lasting up to 2 years – short steady relationship - or more than 2 years – long steady relationship -, respectively. The last two groups involve a similar relationship type – the stable relationship – differing in terms of duration. Groups were formed *a posteriori* through the random selection of participants in the data bank so as to have 40 participants in each configuration group – approximately 20 from each sex. Table 1 presents the research design, including participants' data concerning their Brazilian region of residence and age.

Table 1: Sample characteristics: sex, country region and age per relationship type.

Sex	Relationship type			
	No partner	Informal	Short steady	Long steady
Male	20	21	20	20
Female	20	19	20	20
Country region				
North	0	0	3	0
North-east	3	1	4	8
Center-west	1	3	5	5
South-east	18	20	13	17
South	18	16	15	10
Mean age in years (*SD*)	23.50 (2.34)	23.45 (2.17)	24.20 (3.01)	25.55 (2.53)

Data analysis consisted of comparisons of word evocations for the four configuration groups. No analyses were carried out to verify sex differences: as mentioned previously, that variable was balanced only for the purpose of control in the research design. Words were grouped only according to lemmatization criteria. No semantic equivalences of word forms were made, so as to avoid the interference of bias in thematic categorization (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). The whole analysis was conducted in Portuguese language; the translation to English took place only at the level of the final results reported on this paper.

Evocations were compared through prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1992). That technique provides a first level characterization of representation structure through the crossing of two criteria: frequency and evocation rank, considered respectively as indicators of collective and individual salience. Research results point out that central core elements are usually found among the words with high frequencies that are readily evoked (i.e., that have a low mean evocation rank) (Abric, 1994c, 2003). The numbers of occurrences of words at evocation rank 1 were also described, as it has been shown that sometimes the rank 1 proportion is a better indicator of individual salience of a word than the mean evocation rank (Wachelke, 2008).

It must be stressed though that prototypical analysis only provides centrality hypotheses that need to be confirmed by other techniques (Moliner, 1994). Aside from the mentioned central core zone, highly frequent and later-recalled elements usually refer to a salient peripheral system, while words that have low frequencies but that are evoked early comprise a contrast zone that might be an evidence of the existence of subgroups within a group. Finally, words with high evocation ranks and low frequencies usually refer to particularized aspects of the representation, bearing little interest to a social representation characterization.

Results

Two indexes were calculated to describe the distribution of words associated with each group. The diversity index is the ratio between number of word forms and total number of occurrences for each group. High diversity values (close to 1) imply that there are many word forms with low frequencies, while small ones suggest that a few word forms account for a considerable number of occurrences, which in social representations research is usually an indication of the existence of more organized shared beliefs about a social object. Additionally, the rarity index is a complementary measure of vocabulary diversity obtained through the division of the number of word forms with a single occurrence (called *hapax*) by the total number of word forms. A value close to 1 indicates that the corpus is high in variety and is not concentrated around specific forms in terms of word frequencies (Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

The vocabulary of the informal relationship group is the most diverse of all [Diversity (D) = .39], while participants in the other relationship modalities had a slightly more uniform vocabulary, with the same diversity values (D = .32). Concerning rarity, participants in informal relationships were the ones who mentioned more single-occurrence word forms [Rarity (R) = .67], and individuals outside romantic relationships were the ones to make less use of them (R = .50). Participants involved in short and long steady relationships had intermediate rarity values (respectively R = .59 and R = .63).

Concerning prototypical analysis, all tables included only words with frequencies 4 or higher, that is, mentioned by at least 10% of the participants from each relationship type. The cut-off point to distinguish between low and high frequencies was determined through a qualitative analysis of word frequencies, identifying the approximate spot in which it was steeper, also taking into account a goal of maintaining approximately 30% of evocation occurrences at the high frequency zones. It was then decided that the unified cut-off for all relationship types groups would be 12. The proportions of occurrences at the high frequency zone ranged from 26.7% for participants at informal relationships to 43.3% for participants outside romantic relationships. Since each participant provided five responses, the mean evocation rank cut-off was 3. The comparison of the representations of different groups regarding an object is done qualitatively through the composition of their prototypical analysis tables (see Tables 2, 4, and 5).

The results of participants without relationship partners indicate that there is a dominant element: love, with the highest frequency and approximately half of its evocations at the first rank (see Table 2). The other elements from the central, high peripheral and contrast zones have very close frequencies, and similar low rank 1 proportions. Results suggest that people without partners share an idealized conception of relationships based on love, complemented by a fragmented view of secondary aspects of relationships such as companionship, sex, being faithful and tender.

Table 2: Prototypical analysis on couple relationships for participants without partners.

	Rank < 3			Rank >= 3		
	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)
Freq. >= 12	love	25	1.84 (12)	sex	13	3.39 (2)
(43.3%)	companionship	13	2.69 (3)			
	tenderness	12	2.75 (0)			
	faithfulness	12	2.33 (4)			
	respect	12	2.08 (4)			
Freq. < 12	trust	9	2.57 (1)	friendship	7	3.14 (2)
				sincerity	3	3.43 (1)
				commitment	6	3.50 (1)
				passion	6	3.50 (0)
				loyalty	5	4.00 (0)
				complicity	4	3.75 (0)
				family	4	4.25 (0)

Table 3 presents the results relative to participants within informal relationships. Love is still the element that is more likely to be central, even if its frequency is significantly lower than among non-relationship participants [$\chi^2 (1) = 4.05$; $p = .04$; $V = .23$]. It is noticeable that the fragmentation of the structure is now situated at the contrasting zone; in comparison to the results of participants without relationships, the high frequency zone contains fewer elements. This is an evidence of the increase of representation structure organization as one enters a relationship.

Table 3: Prototypical analysis on couple relationships for participants in informal relationships.

	Rank < 3			Rank >= 3		
	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)
Freq. >= 12	love	16	2.50 (6)	respect	13	3.23 (2)
(26.7%)	complicity	13	2.77 (3)	tenderness	12	3.50 (1)
Freq. < 12	friendship	9	2.33 (2)	passion	9	3.22 (1)
	companionship	9	2.67 (2)	understanding	4	3.50 (0)
	trust	7	1.86 (3)			
	faithfulness	8	2.63 (1)			
	sex	8	2.50 (3)			
	sincerity	5	2.00 (3)			

Table 4 shows the results of participants that were in a steady, but still short relationship. It is remarkable that both love [$\chi^2 (1) = 7.27$; $p = .001$; $V = .30$] and companionship [$\chi^2 (1) = 6.54$; $p = .01$; $V = .29$] have considerably higher frequencies compared to the ones exhibited by informal relationship participants. That seems to be the qualitative effect of changing relationship status on the representation regarding couple relationships. Just as the representation shared by informal relationship participants, the fragmentation of the representation remains at the contrasting zone, with a reduced high frequency zone.

Table 4: Prototypical analysis on couple relationships for participants within short steady relationships.

	Rank < 3			Rank >= 3		
	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)
Freq. >= 12	love	28	2.11 (16)	sex	13	3.15 (0)
(36.8%)	companionship	20	2.70 (7)			
	respect	13	2.85 (2)			
Freq. < 12	trust	11	2.46 (4)	tenderness	9	3.33 (0)
	friendship	9	2.89 (2)	sincerity	6	3.50 (0)
	faithfulness	8	2.88 (2)			
	complicity	6	2.33 (2)			
	commitment	5	1.60 (2)			

Finally, the results relative to the words evoked by participants within long steady relationships are presented on Table 5. Love is still the dominant element of the structure. Even if the frequency of the companionship element is similar to that which was found among participants in short relationships, it is remarkable that it switched to the high peripheral zone: its rank is higher, and not a single occurrence took place at rank 1. A pertinent structural pattern change can also be found concerning the fragmentation of the structure; while for participants within informal or short relationships the zone with more elements was that of contrast, for participants within long relationships the contrast zone contains fewer elements, and the diversity of elements is found within the low peripheral zone, pointing out to authentic idiosyncrasies rather than subgroup formations.

Table 5: Prototypical analysis on couple relationships for participants within long steady relationships.

	Rank <= 3			Rank >= 3		
	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)	Type	Freq.	Rank (rk. 1)
Freq. >= 12	love	27	1.85 (17)	sex	16	3.00 (2)
(41.6%)	respect	13	2.31 (4)	companionship	15	3.33 (0)
				friendship	13	3.39 (2)
Freq. < 12	faithfulness	9	2.67 (3)	tenderness	9	3.22 (0)
	trust	6	2.67 (2)	complicity	8	3.00 (0)
	sincerity	4	1.75 (1)	passion	7	3.00 (1)
				understanding	5	3.75 (0)
				marriage	4	3.00 (1)
				partnership	4	3.25 (1)

It is important to stress that if the two non-steady relationship conditions (no relationship and informal relationship) are merged into one, and also both steady relationship conditions are considered together, there is a significant association involving the evocation of the element love. It was mentioned by 56 (70%) within-relationship participants, whereas only 41 (51.3%) non-relationship participants evoked it [χ^2 (1) = 5.89; p = .015; V = .19]. Those results suggest that love is more likely to be a central element – or at least a that it plays a stronger central role – within the representation on couple relationships for people who are taking part of a steady relation.

Discussion

Results point out that mostly the same words are mentioned with comparable frequencies by all groups, with minor differences in terms of presence or absence or words within the established minimum count of 4. The differences are mainly at the level of modulations in structure, with certain words having more or less salience in each relationship configuration condition.

The common central element in the four analyzed configurations was love. The centrality of that element is evidenced by a vast range of scientific studies about romantic love (Sternberg, 2006; Hatfield, Rapson & Martel, 2007; Cassepp-Borges & Teodoro, 2007), and it seems legitimate to consider that feeling as one of the most important motivations for a person to desire, seek and maintain a relationship with another person.

A first observation involves the representations of participants outside a relationship; the non-relationship condition allows for an understanding of a specific modality of relationship type, in which duration has no influence. For those participants, the couple relationship is represented by aspects that seem to deal with their own expectations, i.e. components that would ideally be present in any relationship: love, respect and fidelity.

An informal relationship is nothing but a short duration relationship type in which some elementary commitment is already there. Results indicate that the representations related to that configuration are more widespread, with less clear consensus. It consists of evidence that when people are engaging in the initial steps of a relationship, different intentions and possibilities come into play, pointing out to a high diversity in terms of the understanding of what a couple relationship is or should be. Perhaps this scattering of conceptions indicates a negotiation process of partners that are still getting to know each other, and that might later influence the maintenance – or break-up – of relationships. Results indicate a representational correspondence of what informal relationships are commonly thought to be: a yet undefined stage of transition and tryouts.

It is noticed that as relationships become stable and survive the passing of time, the structure of the representation is again transformed. With cumulative growth experiences and synchronization of couples that are successful, there is a tendency for homogeny and stability on the beliefs about relationships (Knee, 1998). In the present studies, the representations of participants within stable relationships get more and more structured around the notion of love; other than that, there are mostly subtle changes regarding status of important peripheral elements such as friendship, sex and respect, accounting for a high similarity of representations from participants from short and long relationships. The most remarkable difference regards the companionship element: in long relationships its

structural status decreased, both in terms of frequency and rank 1 proportion.

Overall results indicate that there is a common model of romantic relationships that our participants referred to, in order to define a relationship or evaluate it. It is a conception of romantic relationships as structured above all around the notion of love. A couple relationship must inspire love in the involved partners. Some further aspects are also important, but secondary – as if they were desirable characteristics to look for -, such as friendship, respect, companionship and tenderness.

Nevertheless, our expectations concerning variations in representations based on relationship configuration are also confirmed. Being involved in one or another kind of relationship modulates the structural strength of elements. As examples of that, it could be seen that with the strengthening of the relationship, love tends to become more and more central, while some elements also exhibit fluctuations in status. The overall model pattern can also be outlined more clearly on the representations shared by participants outside relationships and within stable relationships, while participants from informal relationships report a view on romantic relationships that is less differentiated and marked by higher multiplicity and fragmentation: that is also evidence of configuration influence on the modulation of representation structure.

Despite those modulations, the facts that a single model of relationship could be identified from results and that specific configurations only modified the expression of secondary elements of that model – i.e., peripheral elements – it can be concluded that all participants share a single representation on couple relationships. The access to or carrying out of different relationship practices – operationalized by the engagement in relationships with different structural configurations in terms of duration and type – is associated with modifications on representation structure but only at the level of context effects (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). In other words, there is one common representation but there is more or less emphasis in its secondary elements due to characteristics from each relationship context type.

The distribution of words in the quadrants also bears interest to the understanding of the dynamics of the representation on couple relationships as relationship status is transformed. For participants without partners, the core zone is populated by a higher number of elements, which could actually imply a lack of clear representation structure rather than clear organization; as Flament (2001) pointed out, when results indicate that the core is formed by too many elements, it is as if nothing detaches from the rest and finds true emphasis on the structure. The high peripheral and contrast zone are formed by single elements, and there are idiosyncrasies on the low peripheral one. When participants enter informal relationships, the core differentiates itself around less elements, but a contrasting zone composed by a higher number of elements indicates that there are multiple

experiences and views concerning that step of knowing a new partner and trying to evaluate the future of the relationship; whether it 'works' or not. Such pattern is the same for short steady relationships; the new status of a relationship, becoming more 'official' as a commitment, introduces a new reality of change for partners, also offering various views and possibilities for understanding what a couple relationship is or should be. Finally, as the relationships last longer, experiences and views are consolidated, and the representation structure acquires signs of stability and clear organization: a clearly differentiated core zone, reduced high peripheral and contrasting zones, and the less shared evocations with lower importance on the structure, contained within the low peripheral area.

Therefore, if it is considered that groups linked to different structural relationship configurations can be approximated both to groups involved in different practices and also to different relationship states or phases, then the information concerning the contents of each quadrant and the distribution of words per quadrant allows to map the natural dynamics (Moliner, 1998) that regulate representations on couple relationships when changes in relationship status take place. In this case, the context modulations in structure depart from an initial situation of stability and clear organization for participants outside relationships, undergo a period of transformation and crisis on the structure that is due to changes in relationship status (informal and short steady relationships) and achieve stability again when relationships last over time. Such dynamics bear resemblance to the chronological understanding of social representations proposed by Moliner (2001) and based on the phases of emergence, stability and transformation. But it must be made clear that our data refer to modulations limited to context effects, and not to transformation in representations themselves in historical scale. Our results show a minor scale process that is similar to a departure from stability followed by a transformation and finally a return to stability; yet it is situated at the level of individual appropriation of a representation modulated by context influences, rather than at the level of structure itself.

It is essential to stress that only a first level of description of representation structure has been evaluated in the current study. The results that have been obtained allow for the further utilization of structural techniques that are suitable for the confirmation of representation structures, such as centrality questionnaires based on the questioning – *mise en cause* – principle (Moliner, 1994) or basic cognitive schemes (Guimelli & Rouquette, 1992). That might be a logical sequence for upcoming studies on shared beliefs about couple relationships from a structural perspective.

As a concluding note, it is pertinent to state that the ways of living and representing a union with another person are determined by multiple factors that are linked to sex, individual life cycles, sociocultural variables and others that have not been dealt with in the present paper, such as personality, attachment and love styles. Further studies related to repre-

sentations on couple relationships should take into account the refining of the characterization of representations and also assessment the roles of mentioned variables and variable sets on representation structures.

References

Abric, J.-C. (1994a). Les représentations sociales: aspects théoriques. In J.-C. Abric (Ed.), *Pratiques sociales et representations* (pp. 11-36). Paris: PUF.

Abric, J.-C. (1994b). L'organisation interne des representations sociales: système central et système périphérique. In C. Guimelli (Ed.), *Structures et transformations des représentations sociales* (pp. 73-84). Lausanne: Delachaux et Niestlé.

Abric, J.-C. & Tafani, E. (1995). Nature et fonctionnement du noyau central d'une représentation sociale: la représentation de l'entreprise. *Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale, 28*, 22-31l

Alferes, V. R. (1996). Atração interpessoal, sexualidade e relações intímas. In J. Vala & M. B. Monteiro (Eds.), *Psicologia social* (pp. 125-158). Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

Aloni, M. & Bernieri, F. J. (2004). Is love blind? The effects of experience and infatuation on the perception of love. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior, 28*(4), 287 – 295.

Beck, J. G.; Bozman, A. W. & Qualtrough, T. (1991). The experience of sexual desire: psychological correlates in a college sample. *Journal of Sex Research, 28*, 443-456.

Berscheid, E. (2006). Searching for the meaning of "love". In R. J. Sternberg & K. Weis (Eds.), *The new psychology of love* (pp. 171-183). New Haven: Yale.

Bertoldo, R. B. & Barbará, A. (2006). Representação social do namoro: a visão de intimidade entre os jovens. *Psico-USF, 11*(2), 229-237.

Buss, D. M. (2000). *The dangerous passion: why jealousy is as necessary as love and sex.* New York: Free Press.

Cassep-Borges, V. & Teodoro, M. (2007). Propriedades psicométricas da versão brasileira da Escala Triangular do Amor de Sternberg. *Psicologia Reflexão e Crítica, 20*(3), 513-522.

Cimbalo, R. S. & Novell, D. O. (1993). Sex differences in romantic love attitudes among college students. *Psychological Reports, 73*, 15 – 18.

Fehr, B. & Broughton, R. (2001). Gender and personality differences in conceptions of love: an interpersonal theory analysis. *Personal Relationships, 9*, 115 – 136.

Flament, C. (1994). Structure, dynamique et transformation des representations sociales. In J. C. Abric (Ed.), *Pratiques sociales et representations* (pp. 37-58). Paris: PUF.

Flament, C. (2001). Pratiques sociales et dynamique des représentations. In P. Moliner (Ed.), *La dynamique des représentations sociales* (pp. 43-58). Grenoble: PUG.

Flament, C. & Rouquette, M.-L. (2003). *Anatomie des idées ordinaires.* Paris: Armand Colin.

Fletcher, G. J. O.; Simpson, J. A. & Thomas. G. (2000). The measurement of perceived relationship quality components: a confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26*(3) 340-354.

Guimelli, C. (1989). Pratiques nouvelles et transformation sans rupture d'une représentation sociale: la représentation de la chasse et de la nature. In J.-L. Beauvois, R. V. Joulé & J.-M. Monteil (Eds.), *Perspectives cognitives et conduites sociales, Tome 2* (pp. 117-138). Cousset: DelVal.

Guimelli, C. (1994). La fonction d'infirmière: pratiques et représentations sociales. In J.-C. Abric (Ed.), *Pratiques sociales et représentations* (pp. 83-107). Paris: PUF.

Guimelli, C. (1995). Valence et structure des représentations sociales. *Bulletin de Psychologie, 49*(422), 58-72.

Guimelli, C. (1999). *La pensée sociale.* Paris: PUF.

Guimelli, C. & Jacobi, D. (1990). Pratiques nouvelles et transformation des représentations sociales. *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale, 3*(3), 307-334.

Guimelli, C. & Rouquette, M.-L. (1992). Contribution du modèle associatif des schèmes cognitifs de base à l'analyse structurale des représentations sociales. *Bulletin de Psychologie, 405*, 196-202.

Hatfield, E. (1988). Passionate and companionate love. In R. J. Sternberg & M. L. Barnes (Eds.), *The psychology of love* (pp. 191-217). New Haven, Yale.

Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (1996). *Love and sex: cross-cultural perspectives.* New York: Allyn & Bacon.

Hatfield, E.; Rapson, R. L. & Martel, L. D. (2007). Passionate love and sexual desire. In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural psychology* (pp. 760-779). New York: Guilford Press.

Hatfield, E.; Singelis, T.; Levine, T.; Bachman, G.; Muto, K. & Choo, P. (2007). Love schemas, preferences in romantic partners, and reactions to commitment. *Interpersona, 1*(1), 1 -19.

Hazan, C. & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*(3), 511 – 524.

Hendrick, S. S. & Hendrick, C. (2002). Linking romantic love with sex: development of the Perceptions of Love and Sex Scale. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationship, 19*, 361 – 378.

Hinde, R. A. (1997). *Relationships: a dialectical perspective.* Psychology Press: Hove, U.K.

Impett, E. A.; Strachman, A.; Finkel, E. J.; & Gable, S. L. (2008). Maintaining sexual desire in relatiships: the importance of approach goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 94*(8), 808-823.

Karwowski-Marques, A. P. M. (2008). *Teorias do amor e a satisfação no relacionamento conjugal.* Research Master Dissertation in Psychology. Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, Novo Hamburgo.

Kim, J. & Hatfield, E. (2004). Love types and subjective well being: a cross-cultural study. *Social Behavior and Personality, 32*(2), 173-182.

Knee, C. R. (1998). Implicit theories of relationships: assessment and prediction of romantic relationship initiation, coping and longevity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*(2), 360 – 370.

Lheureux, F.; Rateau, P. & Guimelli, C. (2008). Hiérarchie structurale, condionnalité et normativité des représentations sociales. *Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale, 77*, 41-55.

Lichter, D. T. & Carmald, J. H. (2008). Religion and marital quality among low-income couples. *Social Science Research, 38*(1), 168-187.

Medina, J. L. V.; López-Fuentes, N. I. G.-A.; Valdez, A. & Jiménez, M. C. L. (2007). La elección real e ideal de pareja: un estudio con pareja establecidas. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology, 41*(3), 305-311.

Moliner, P. (1994). Les méthodes de répérage et d'identification du noyau des représentations sociales. In C. Guimelli (Ed.), *Structures et transformations des représentations sociales* (pp. 199-232). Lausanne: Delachaux et Niestlé.

Moliner, P. (1998). Dynamique naturelle des représentations sociales. *Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale, 40*, 62-70.

Moliner, P. (2001). Une approche chronologique des représentations sociales. In P. Moliner (Ed.), *La dynamique des représentations sociales* (pp. 245-268). Grenoble: PUG.

Ross, M. (1989). *Relation of implicit theories to the construct of personal histories.* Psychological Review, 96, 341 – 357.

Rouquette, M.-L. & Rateau, P. (1998). *Introduction à l'étude des représentations sociales.* Grenoble: PUG.

Sampaio, D.; Oliveira, A.; Vinagre, M. G.; Gouveia-Pereiras, M.; Santos, N. & Ordaz, O. (2000). Representações sociais sobre o suicídio de estudantes do ensino secundário. *Análise Psicológica, 2*(18), 139 – 155.

Schmitt, D. P. (2006). Evolutionary and cross-cultural perspectives on love: the influence of gender, personality, and local ecology on emotional investment in romantic relationships. In R. J. Sternberg & K. Weis (Eds.), *The new psychology of love* (pp. 249-273). New Haven: Yale.

Shaver, P. R.; Wu, S. & Schwartz, J. C. (1991). Cross-cultural similarities and differences in emotion and its representation: a prototype approach. *Review of Personality and Social Psychology, 13*, 175-212.

Silva, D. Z., & Pereira, C. A. A., (2005). O papel da consistência ideal - percepção no bem-estar subjetivo em relacionamentos íntimos. *Psico, 36*(2), 181-188.

Sternberg, R. J. (1986). A triangular theory of love. *Psychological Review, 93*, 119 – 135.

Sternberg, R. J. & Weis, K. (Eds.). *The new psychology of love*. New Haven: Yale.

Traupmann, J. & Hatfield, E. (1981). Love and its effect on mental and physical health. In R. W. Fogel, E. Hatfield, & E. Shanes (Eds.). *Aging: stability and change in family* (pp. 253-274). San Diego: Academic Press.

Wachelke, J. (2008). Relationship between response evocation rank in social representations associative tasks and personal symbolic value. *International Review of Social Psychology, 21*(3), 232-242.

White, J. K. Hendrick, S. S. & Hendrick, C. (2004). Big five personality variables and relationship constructs. *Personality and Individual Differences, 37*, 1519 – 1530.